

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
THE STUDY OF
BROWNING

BY
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“ . . . Browning, a great poet, a very great poet indeed, as the world will have to agree with us in ‘hinking.’”—LANDOR.

GEORGE MEREDITH,

NOVELIST AND POET,

THIS LITTLE BOOK ON AN ILLUSTRIOUS CONTEMPORARY

IS WITH DEEP RESPECT AND ADMIRATION

INSCRIBED.

P R E F A C E.

I HAVE ever held that the rod with which popular fancy invests criticism is properly the rod of divination : a hazel-switch for the discovery of buried treasure, not a birch-twig for the castigation of offenders. It has therefore been my aim in the following pages to direct attention to the best, not to forage for the worst—the small faults which acquire prominence only by isolation—of the poet with whose writings I am concerned. I wish also to give information, more or less detailed, about each of Mr. Browning's works ; information sufficient to the purpose I have in view, which is to induce those who have hitherto deprived themselves of a stimulating pleasure to deprive themselves of it no longer. Further, my aim is in no sense controversial. In a book whose sole purpose is to serve as an introduction to the study of a single one of our contemporary poets, I have consciously and carefully refrained from instituting comparisons—which I deprecate as, to say the least, unnecessary—between the poet in question and any of the other eminent poets in whose time we have the honour of living.

I have to thank Mr. Browning for permission to reprint the interesting and now almost inaccessible prefaces to some of his earlier works, which will be found in Appendix II.

I have also to thank Dr. Furnivall for permission to make use of his *Browning Bibliography*, and for other kind help. I wish to acknowledge my obligation to Mrs. Orr's *Handbook to Robert Browning's Works*, and to some of the Browning Society's papers, for helpful information and welcome light. Finally, I would tender my especial and grateful thanks to Mr. J. Dykes Campbell, who has given me much kindly assistance.

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF BROWNING.

THE first and perhaps the final impression we receive from the works of Robert Browning is that of a great nature, an immense personality. The poet in him is made up of many men. He is dramatist, humorist, lyrist, painter, musician, philosopher and scholar, each in full measure, and he includes and dominates them all. In richness of nature, in scope and penetration of mind and vision, in all the potentialities of poetry, he is probably second among English poets to Shakespeare alone. In art, in the power or the patience of working his native ore, he is surpassed by many ; but few have ever held so rich a mine in fee. So large, indeed, appear to be his natural endowments, that we cannot feel as if even thirty volumes have come near to exhausting them.

As it is, he has written more than any other English poet with the exception of Shakespeare, and he comes very near the gigantic total of Shakespeare. He has been publishing for more than half a century, and his career, happily for us, is not yet closed. Mass of work is of course in itself worth nothing without due quality ; but there is no surer test nor any more fortunate concomitant of greatness than the union of the two. The highest genius is splendidly spendthrift ; it is only the second order that needs to be niggardly. Mr. Browning's works are not a mere collection of poems, they are a literature. And his literature is the richest of modern

times. If "the best poetry is that which reproduces the most of life," his place is among the great poets of the world. In the vast extent of his work he has dealt with or touched on nearly every phase and feature of humanity, and his scope is bounded only by the soul's limits and the last reaches of life. But of all "Poetical Works," small or great, his is the most consistent in its unity. The manner has varied not a little, the comparative worth of individual poems is widely different, but from the first word to the last the attitude is the same, the outlook on life the same, the conception of God and man, of the world and nature, always the same. This unity, though it may be deduced from, or at least accommodated to, a system of philosophical thought, is much more the outcome of a natural and inevitable bent. No great poet ever constructed his poems upon a theory, but a theory may often be very legitimately discovered in them. Mr. Browning, in his essay on Shelley, divides all poets into two classes, subjective and objective, the Seer and the Maker. His own genius includes a large measure of them both ; for it is equally strong on the dramatic and the metaphysical side. There are for him but two realities, and but two subjects, Life and Thought. On these are expended all his imagination and all his intellect, more consistently and in a higher degree than can be said of any English poet since the age of Elizabeth. Life and thought, the dramatic and the metaphysical, are not considered apart, but woven into one seamless tissue ; and in regard to both he has one point of view and one manner of treatment. It is this that causes the unity which subsists throughout his works ; and it is this, too, which distinguishes him among poets, and makes that originality by virtue of which he has been described as the most striking figure in our poetic literature.

Most poets endeavour to sink the individual in the universal ; it is the special distinction of Mr. Browning that when he is most universal he is most individual. As a

thinker he conceives of humanity not as an aggregate, but as a collection of units. Most thinkers write and speak of man ; Mr. Browning of men. With man as a species, with man as a society, he does not concern himself, but with individual man and man. Every man is for him an epitome of the universe, a centre of creation. Life exists for each as completely and separately as if he were the only inhabitant of our planet. In the religious sense this is the familiar Christian view ; but Mr. Browning, while accepting, does not confine himself to, the religious sense. He conceives of each man as placed on the earth with a purpose of probation. Life is given him as a test of his quality ; he is exposed to the chances and changes of existence, to the opposition and entanglement of circumstances, to evil, to doubt, to the influence of his fellow men, and to the conflicting powers of his own soul ; and he succeeds or fails, toward God, or as regards his real end and aim, according as he is true or false to his better nature, his conceptions of right. He is not to be judged by the vulgar standards of worldly success or unsuccess ; not even by his actions, good or bad as they may seem to us, for action can never fully translate the thought or motive which lay at its root ; success or unsuccess, the prime and final fact in life, lies between his soul and God. The poet, in Mr. Browning's view of him, is God's witness, and must see and speak for God. He must therefore conceive of each individual separately and distinctively, and he must see how each soul conceives of itself.

Here is it that Mr. Browning parts company most decisively with all other poets who concern themselves exclusively with life—dramatic poets, as we call them ; so that it seems almost necessary to invent some new term to define precisely his special attitude. And hence it is that in his drama thought plays comparatively so large, and action comparatively so small, a part ; hence, that action is valued

only in so far as it reveals thought or motive, not for its own sake, as the crown and flower of these.

“To the motive, the endeavour, the heart’s self
His quick sense looks : he crowns and calls aright
The soul o’ the purpose, ere ’tis shaped as act,
Takes flesh i’ the world, and clothes itself a king.”

For his endeavour is not to set men in action for the pleasure of seeing them move ; but to see and show, in their action and inaction alike, the real impulses of their being : to see how each soul conceives of itself.

This individuality of presentment is carried out equally in the domain of life and of thought ; as each man lives, so he thinks and perceives, so he apprehends God and truth, for himself only. It is evident that this special standpoint will give not only a unity but an originality to the works of which it may be called the root ; equally evident that it will demand a special method and a special instrument.

The dramatic poet, in the ordinary sense, in the sense in which we apply it to Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, aims at showing, by means of action, the development of character as it manifests itself to the world in deeds. His study is character, but it is character in action, considered only in connection with a particular grouping of events, and only so far as it produces or operates upon these. The processes are concealed from us, we see the result. In the very highest realisations of this dramatic power, and always in intention, we are presented with a perfect picture, in which every actor lives, and every word is audible ; perfect, complete in itself, without explanation, without comment ; a dogma incarnate, which we must accept as it is given us, and explain and illustrate for ourselves. If we wish to know what this character or that thought or felt in his very soul, we may perhaps have data from which to construct a more or less

probable hypothesis ; but that is all. We are told nothing, we care but little to know of what is going on in the thought ; of the infinitely subtle meshes of motive or emotion which will perhaps find no direct outcome in speech, no direct manifestation in action, but by which the soul's life in reality subsists. This is not the intention : it is a spectacle of life we are beholding ; and life is action.

But is there no other sense in which a poet may be dramatic, besides this sense of the acting drama ? no new form possible, which

“ peradventure may outgrow,
The simulation of the painted scene,
Boards, actors, prompters, gaslight, and costume,
And take for a nobler stage the soul itself,
Its shifting fancies and celestial lights,
With all its grand orchestral silences,
To keep the pauses of the rhythmic sounds.” *

This new form of drama is the drama as we see it in Mr. Browning, a drama of the interior, a tragedy or comedy of the soul. Instead of a grouping of characters which shall act on one another to produce a certain result in action, we have a grouping of events useful or important only as they influence the character or the mind. This is very clearly explained in the original Advertisement to *Paracelsus*, where Mr. Browning tells us that his poem is an attempt

“ to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim it is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons and events ; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded.”

In this way, by making the soul the centre of action, he is

* *Aurora Leigh*, Book Fifth.

enabled (thinking himself into it, as all dramatists must do) to bring out its characteristics, to reveal its very nature. Suppose he is attracted by some particular soul or ^{by} some particular act. The problem occupies him—the more abstruse and entangled the more attractive to him it is; he winds his way into the heart of it, or, we might better say, he picks to pieces the machinery. Presently he begins to reconstruct, before our eyes, the whole series of events, the whole substance of the soul, but, so to speak, turned inside out. We watch the workings of the mental machinery as it is slowly disclosed before us; we note its specialties of construction, its individual character, the interaction of parts, every secret of it. We thus come to see that, considered from the proper point of view, everything is clear, regular and explicable in however entangled an action, however obscure a soul; we see that everything external is perfectly natural when we can view its evolution from the internal. It must not be supposed that Mr. Browning explains this to us in the manner of an anatomical lecturer; he makes every character explain itself by its own speech, and very often by speech that is, or seems, sophistical, but which, being personal and individual, explains—perhaps by exposing—its speaker.

Such, then, are Mr. Browning's consistent mental attitude and his special method. But he has also a special instrument—the monologue. The drama of action demands a concurrence of several distinct personalities, influencing one another rapidly by word or deed, so as to bring about the catastrophe; hence the propriety of the dialogue. But the introspective drama, in which the design is to represent and reveal the individual, requires a concentration of interest, a focussing of light on one point, to the exclusion or subordination of surroundings; hence the propriety of the monologue, in which a single speaker or thinker can consciously or unconsciously exhibit his own soul. The form of

monologue appears in Mr. Browning's very earliest poem, and he has developed it more skilfully and employed it more consistently than any other writer. Even in works like *Sordello* and *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, which are thrown into the narrative form, many of the finest and most characteristic parts are in monologue; and *The Inn Album* is a series of slightly-linked dialogues which are only monologues in disguise. Nearly all the lyrics, romances, idyls—nearly all the miscellaneous poems, long and short, are monologues. And even in the dramas, as will be seen later, there is visible a growing tendency toward the monologue with its mental and individual, in place of the dialogue with its active and various interest.

Mr. Browning's aim, then, being to see how each soul conceives of itself, and to exhibit its essential qualities, yet without a complication of incident, it is his frequent practice to reveal the soul to itself by the application of a sudden test, which shall condense the long trial of years into a single moment, and so "flash the truth out by one blow." To this practice we owe his most vivid and notable work. "The poetry of Robert Browning," says Mr. Pater, "is pre-eminently the poetry of situations." He selects a character, no matter how uninteresting in itself, and places it in some situation where its vital essence may become apparent—in some crisis of conflict or opportunity. The choice of good or evil is open to it, and in perhaps a single moment its fate will be decided. When a soul plays dice with the devil there is only a second in which to win or lose; but the second may be worth an eternity. These moments of intense significance, these tremendous spiritual crises, are struck out in Mr. Browning's poetry with a clearness and sharpness of outline that no other poet has achieved. "To realise such a situation, to define in a chill and empty atmosphere the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn, the artist has to employ the most cunning

detail, to complicate and refine upon thought and passion a thousand fold . . . Yet, in spite of this intricacy . . . we receive from it the impression of one imaginative tone, of a single creative act."*

It is as a result of this purpose, in consonance with this practice, that we get in Mr. Browning's works so large a number of distinct human types, and so great a variety of surroundings in which they are placed. Only in Shakespeare can we find anything like the same variety of distinct human characters—vital creations endowed with thoughtful life; and not even, perhaps, in Shakespeare, such novelty and variety of *milieu*. There is scarcely a salient epoch in the history of the modern world which he has not touched, always with the same vital and instinctive sympathy based on profound and accurate knowledge. Passing by the legendary and undeveloped ages and civilisations of East and West, he has painted the first dawn of the modern spirit in the Athens of Socrates and Euripides, revealed the whole temper and tendency of the twilight age between Paganism and Christianity, and recorded the last utterance of the last apostle of the now-conquering creed; he has distilled the very essence of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the very essence of the modern world. The men and women who live and move in that new world of his creation are as varied as life itself: they are kings and beggars, saints and lovers, great captains, poets, painters, musicians, priests and popes, Jews, gipsies and dervishes, street-girls, princesses, dancers with the wicked witchery of the daughter of Herodias, wives with the devotion of the wife of Brutus, joyous girls and malevolent greybeards, statesmen, cavaliers, soldiers of humanity, tyrants and bigots, ancient sages and modern spiritualists, heretics, scholars, scoundrels, devotees, rabbis, persons of quality and men of low estate—men and women as multi-form as nature or society has made them.

* Walter Pater, *Studies in the Renaissance*, pp. 186-7.

He has found and studied humanity, not only in English towns and villages, in the glare of gaslight and under the open sky, but on the Roman Campagna, in Venetian gondolas, in Florentine streets, on the Boulevards of Paris and the Prado of Madrid, in the snow-bound forests of Russia, beneath the palms of Persia and upon Egyptian sands, on the coasts of Normandy and the salt plains of Brittany, among Druses and Arabs and Syrians, in brand-new Boston and amidst the ruins of Thebes. But this infinite variety has little in it of mere historic or social curiosity. I do not think Mr. Browning has ever set himself the task of recording the legend of the ages, though to some extent he has done it. The instinct of the poet seizes on a type of character, the eye of the painter perceives the shades and shapes of line and colour and form required to give it picturesque prominence, and the learning of the scholar then sets up a fragment of the broken past, or re-fashions a portion of the living present, as an appropriate and harmonious scene or background. The statue is never dwarfed by the pedestal.

The characteristic of which I have been speaking—the persistent care for the individual and personal, as distinguished from the universal and general—while it is the secret of his finest achievements, and rightly his special charm, is of all things the most alien to the ordinary conceptions of poetry, and the usual preferences for it. The popularity of rare and delicate poetry, which condescends to no cheap bids for it—poetry like Lord Tennyson's, for instance—is largely due to the very quality which Mr. Browning's finest characteristic excludes from his. Compare, altogether apart from the worth and workmanship, one of Lord Tennyson's with one of Mr. Browning's best lyrics. The perfection of the former consists in the exquisite way in which it expresses feelings common to all. The perfection of the latter consists in the intensity of its expression of a single moment of passion or emotion, one peculiar to a single

personality, and to that personality only at such a single moment. To appreciate it we must enter keenly and instantaneously into the imaginary character at its imagined crisis; and, even when this is easiest to do, it is evident that there must be more difficulty in doing it—for it requires a certain exertion—than in merely letting the mind lie at rest, accepting and absorbing. And the difficulty is increased when we remember another of Mr. Browning's characteristics, closely allied to this, and, indeed, resulting from it: his preference for the unusual and complex rather than the simple and ordinary. People prefer to read about characters which they can understand at first sight, with which they can easily sympathise. A dramatist who insists on presenting them with complex and exceptional characters, studies of the good in evil and the evil in good, representations of states of mind which are not habitual to them, or which they find it difficult to realise in certain lights, can never obtain so quick or so hearty a recognition as one who deals with great actions, large and clear characters, familiar motives. When the head has to be exercised before the heart, there is chilling of sympathy.

Allied to Mr. Browning's originality in temper, topic, manner of treatment and special form, is his originality in style; an originality which is again due, in large measure, to the same prevailing cause. His style is vital, his verse moves to the throbbing of an inner organism, not to the pulsations of a machine. He prefers, as indeed all true poets do, but more exclusively than any other poet, sense to sound, thought to expression. In his desire of condensation he employs as few words as are consistent with the right expression of his thought; he rejects superfluous adjectives, and all stop-gap words. He refuses to use words for words' sake: he declines to interrupt conversation with a display of fireworks: and as a result it will be found that his finest effects of versification correspond with his highest achieve-

ments in imagination and passion. As a dramatic poet he is obliged to modulate and moderate, sometimes even to vulgarise,* his style and diction for the proper expression of some particular character, in whose mouth exquisite turns of phrase and delicate felicities of rhythm would be inappropriate. He will not *let himself go* in the way of easy floridity, as writers may whose themes are more "ideal." And where many writers would attempt merely to simplify and sweeten verse, he endeavours to give it fuller expressiveness, to give it strength and newness. It follows that Mr. Browning's verse is not so uniformly melodious as that of many other poets. Where it seems to him necessary to sacrifice one of the two—sense or sound—he has never hesitated to sacrifice the lower to the higher. But while he has certainly failed in some of his works, or in some passages of them, to preserve the due balance, while he has at times undoubtedly sacrificed sound too liberally to the claims of sense, the extent of this sacrifice is very much less than is generally supposed. The notion, only too general, expressed by such a phrase as "*his habitual rudeness of versification*" (used by no unfavourable *Edinburgh* reviewer in 1869) is one of the most singularly erroneous perversions of popular prejudice that have ever called for correction at the hands of serious criticism.

Mr. Browning is far indeed from paying no attention, or little, to metre and versification. Except in some of his later blank verse, and in a few other cases, his very errors are just as often the result of hazardous experiments as of carelessness and inattention. In one very important matter, that of rhyme, he is perhaps the greatest master in our language; in single and double, in simple and grotesque alike, he succeeds in fitting rhyme to rhyme with a perfection which I have never found in any other poet of any age. His lyrical poems contain more structural varieties of form than those of any preceding English poet, not excepting

Shelley. His blank verse at its best is of higher quality—taking it for what it is, dramatic blank verse—than that of any modern poet. And both in rhymed and in blank verse he has written passages which for almost every quality of verse are hardly to be surpassed in the language.

That Mr. Browning's style should have changed in the course of years is only natural, and its development has been in the natural (if not always in the best) direction. "The later manner of a painter or poet," says Mr. F. W. H. Myers in his essay on Virgil, "generally differs from his earlier manner in much the same way. We observe in him a certain impatience of the rules which have guided him to excellence, a certain desire to use his materials more freely, to obtain bolder and newer effects." These tendencies, and others of the kind, are specially manifest in Mr. Browning, as they must be in a writer of strongly marked originality; for originality always strengthens with use, and often hardens to eccentricity, as we may observe in the somewhat parallel case of Carlyle. We find as a consequence that a great deal of his later poetry is much less attractive and much less artistically perfect than his earlier work, while just those failings to which his principles of poetic art rendered him liable become more and more frequent and prominent. But, good or bad, it has grown with his growth, and we can conceive him saying, with *Aurora Leigh*,

"So life, in deepening with me, deepened all
The course I took, the work I did. Indeed
The academic law convinced of sin;
The critics cried out on the falling off,
Regretting the first manner. But I felt
My heart's life throbbing in my verse to show
It lived, it also—certes incomplete,
Disordered with all Adam in the blood,
But even its very tumours, warts and wens,
Still organised by and implying life." *

* *Aurora Leigh*, Book Third.

It has been, as a rule, strangely overlooked, though it is a matter of the first moment, that Mr. Browning's poems are almost invariably *works of art*, and this in a very high degree, positive and relative, if we understand by a "work of art" a poem which attains its end and fulfils its purpose completely, and which has a worthy end and a plain purpose to attain. Surely this is of far more vital importance than the mere melodiousness of single lines, or a metre of unvarying sweetness bearing gently along in its placid course (as a stream the leaf or twig fallen into it from above) some tiny thought or finikin fragment of emotion. Mr. Matthew Arnold, our highest living authority in such matters, tells us with emphasis of "the necessity of accurate construction, and the subordinate character of expression." * His next words, though bearing a slightly different signification, may very legitimately be applied to Mr. Browning. Mr. Arnold tells us "how unspeakably superior is the effect of the one moral impression left by a great action treated as a whole, to the effect produced by the most striking single thought or by the happiest image." For "a great action," read "an adequate subject," and the words define and defend Mr. Browning's principle and practice exactly. There is no characteristic of his work more evident, none more admirable or more rare than the unity, the compactness and completeness, the skill and care in construction and definiteness in impression, of each poem. I do not know any contemporary of whom this may more truly be said. The assertion will be startling, no doubt, to those who are accustomed to think of Mr. Browning (as people once thought of Shakespeare) as a poet of great gifts but little skill; as a giant, but a clumsy giant; as what the French call a *nature*—an almost unconscious force, expending itself at random, without rule or measure. But take, for example, the series of *Men and Women*, as originally published, read poem after poem—there are fifty to choose

* Preface to *Poems*, 1853.

from—and scrutinise each separately; see what was the writer's intention, and observe how far he has fulfilled it, how far he has succeeded in conveying to your mind a distinct and sharply-cut impression. You will find that whatever be the subject, whatever the style, whether in your eyes the former be mistaken, the latter perverse, the poem itself, within its recognised limits, is designed, constructed and finished with the finest skill of the draughtsman or the architect. You will find that the impression you have received from the whole is single and vivid, and, while you may not perceive it, it will generally be the case that certain details at which your fastidiousness cried out, certain uncouthnesses, as you fancy, are perfectly appropriate and in their place, and have contributed to the perfection of the *ensemble*.

A word may here be said in reference to the charge of "obscurity," which, from the time when Mr. Browning's earliest poem was disposed of by a complacent critic in the single phrase, "A piece of pure bewilderment," has been hurled at each succeeding poem with re-iterate vigour of virulence. The charge of "pure bewilderment" is about as reasonable as the charge of "habitual rudeness of versification." It is a fashion. People abuse their "Browning" as they abuse their "Bradshaw," though all that is wanting, in either case, is a little patience and a little common sense. Mr. Browning might say, as his wife said in an early preface, "I never mistook pleasure for the final cause of poetry, nor leisure for the hour of the poet"—as indeed he has himself said, to much the same effect, in a letter printed many years ago: "I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game at dominoes to an idle man." But he has not made anything like such a demand on the reader's faculties as people—not readers—seem to suppose. *Sordello* is difficult, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* is difficult, so, perhaps, in parts, is

Fifine at the Fair; so, too, on account of its unfamiliar allusions, is *Aristophanes' Apology*; and a few smaller poems, here and there, remotely argumentative or specially complex in psychology, are difficult. But really these are all to which such a term as "unintelligible," so freely and recklessly flung about, could with even a *show* of reason be applied by any reasonable being. In the 21,116 lines which form Mr. Browning's longest work and masterpiece, the "psychological epic" of *The Ring and the Book*, I incline to think it very possible that a careful scrutiny might reveal 116 which an ordinary reader would require to read twice. Anything more clear than the work as a whole it would be difficult to find. It is much easier to follow than *Paradise Lost*; the *Agamemnon* is rather less easy to follow than *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. *Sordello* itself, in its worst entanglements, is more extricable than many parts of the divine poem in which Dante enshrined the memory of the man *Sordello*.

That there is some excuse for the accusation, no one would or could deny. But it is only the excuse of a misconception. Mr. Browning is a thinker of extraordinary depth and subtlety; his themes are seldom superficial, often very remote, and his thought is, moreover, as swift as it is subtle. To a dull reader there is little difference between cloudy and fiery thought; the one is as much too bright for him as the other is too dense. Of all thinkers in poetry, Mr. Browning is the most swift and fiery. "If there is any great quality," says Mr. Swinburne, in those noble pages in which he has so generously and triumphantly vindicated his brother-poet from this very charge of obscurity—

"If there is any great quality more perceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect, it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought, his sureness and intensity of perception, his rapid and trenchant resolution of aim. To charge him with obscurity is about as accurate as to call Lynceus purblind, or complain of the sluggish action of the tele-

graphic wire. He is something too much the reverse of obscure ; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realise with what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward, as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread to thread, and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought, woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception, and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination. He never thinks but at full speed ; and the rate of his thought is to that of another man's as the speed of a railway to that of a waggon, or the speed of a telegraph to that of a railway."*

Moreover, while a writer who deals with easy themes has no excuse if he is not pellucid to a glance, one who employs his intellect and imagination on high and hard questions has a right to demand a corresponding closeness of attention, and a right to say, with Bishop Butler, in answer to a similar complaint : " It must be acknowledged that some of the following discourses are very abstruse and difficult ; or, if you please, obscure : but I must take leave to add that those alone are judges whether or no, and how far this is a fault, who are judges whether or no, and how far it might have been avoided—those only who will be at the trouble to understand what is here said, and to see how far the things here insisted upon, and not other things, might have been put in a plainer manner."†

There is another popular misconception to which also a word in passing may as well be devoted. This is the idea, that Mr. Browning's personality is apt to get confused with his characters', that his men and women are not separate creations, projected from his brain into an independent

* *George Chapman : A Critical Essay*, 1875.

† *Works*, 1847, Preface to *Sermons*, pp. viii.-ix., where will also be found some exceedingly sensible remarks, which I commend to those whom they concern, on persons " who take it for granted that they are acquainted with everything ; and that no subject, if treated in the manner it should be, can be treated in any manner but what is familiar and easy to them."

existence, but mere masks or puppets through whose mouths he speaks. This fallacy arises from the fact that not a few of his imaginary persons express themselves in a somewhat similar fashion ; or, as people too rashly say, "talk like Browning." The explanation of this apparent paradox, so far as it exists, is not far to seek. All art is a compromise, and all dramatic speech is *in fact* impossible. No persons in real life would talk as Shakespeare or any other great dramatist makes them talk. Nor do the characters of Shakespeare talk like those of any other great dramatist, except in so far as later playwrights have consciously imitated Shakespeare. Every dramatic writer has his own style, and in this style, subject to modification, all his characters speak. Just as a soul, born out of eternity into time, takes on itself the impress of earth and the manners of human life, so a dramatic creation, pure essence in the shaping imagination of the poet, takes on itself, in its passage into life, something of the impress of its abode. "The poet, in short, endows his creations with his own attributes ; he enables them to utter their feelings as if they themselves were poets, thus giving a true voice even to that intensity of passion which in real life often hinders expression."* If this fact is recognised—that dramatic speech is not real speech, but poetical speech, and poetical speech infused with the individual style of each individual dramatist, modulated, indeed, but true to one keynote—then it must be granted that Mr. Browning has as much right to his own style as other dramatists have to theirs, and as little right as they to be accused on that account of putting his personality into his work. But as Mr. Browning's style is very pronounced and original, it is more easily recognisable than that of most dramatists—so far, no doubt, a defect †—and

* "Realism in Dramatic Art," *New Quarterly Magazine*, Oct., 1879.

† Allowing at its highest valuation all that need be allowed on this score, we find only that Mr. Browning has the defects of his qualities ; and from

for this reason it has come to seem relatively more prominent than it really is. This consideration, and not any confusion of identity, is the cause of whatever similarity of speech exists between Mr. Browning and his characters, or between individual characters. The similarity is only skin-deep. Take a convenient instance, *The Ring and the Book*. I have often seen it stated that the nine tellings of the story are all told in the same style, that all the speakers—Guido and Pompilia, the Pope and Tertium Quid alike—speak like Browning. I cannot see it. On the contrary, I have been astonished, in reading and re-reading the poem, at the variety, the difference, the wonderful individuality in each speaker's way of telling the same story—at the profound art with which the rhythm, the metaphors, the very details of language, no less than the broad distinctions of character and the subtle indications of bias, are adapted and converted into harmony. A certain general style, a certain general manner of expression, are common to all, as is also the case in, let us say, *The Tempest*. But what distinction, what variation of tone, what delicacy and expressiveness of modulation! As a simple matter of fact, few writers have ever had a greater flexibility of style than Mr. Browning.

I am doubtful whether full justice has been done to one section of Mr. Browning's dramatic work—his portraits of women. The presence of Woman is not perhaps relatively so prominent in his work as it is in the work of some other poets; he has nothing of that exclusive preoccupation with the subject, nothing of that adoring or reviling fascination, which

these who is exempted? By virtue of this style of his he has succeeded in rendering into words the very inmost thoughts and finest shades of feeling of the "men and women fashioned by his fancy," and in such a task we can pardon even a fault—for such a result we can overlook even a blemish; as Lessing, in *Laokoon*, remarking on an error in Raphael's drapery, finely says, "Who will not rather praise him for having had the wisdom and the courage to commit a slight fault, for the sake of greater fulness of expression?"

we sometimes see ; but as faithful and vital representations, I do not hesitate to put his portraits of women quite on a level with his portraits of men, and far beyond those of any other English poet of the last three centuries. In some of them, notably in *Pompilia*, there is a something—I can hardly describe it—which always seems to me almost incredible in a man : an instinct that one would have thought only a woman could possess. And his women, good or bad, are always real women, and they are represented without bias. Mr. Browning is one of the very few men—Mr. Meredith, whose women are, perhaps, the consummate flower of his work, is the only other now living in England—who can paint women without idealisation or degradation, not from the man's side, but from their own ; as living equals, not as goddesses or as toys. His women live, act, and suffer—even think ; not assertively, mannishly—for the loveliest of them have a very delicate charm of girlishness—but with natural volition, on equal rights with men. Any one who has thought at all on the matter will acknowledge that this is the highest praise that could be given—the highest and rarest. Mr. Browning's women are not indeed as various as his men ; but from *Ottima* to *Pompilia*—from the “ great white queen, magnificent in sin,” to the “ lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf”—what a range and gradation of character ! These are the two extremes ; between them, as earth lies between heaven and hell, are stationed all the others, from the faint and delicate dawn in *Pauline*, *Michal* and *Palma*, on through *Pippa* and *Mildred* and *Colombe* and *Constance* and the *Queen*, to *Balaustion* and *Elvire*, *Fifine* and *Clara* and the heroine of the *Inn Album*, and the lurid close in *Cristina*. I have named only a few, and how many there are to name ! Someone has written a book on *Shakespeare's Women* : whoever writes a book on *Browning's Women* will have a task only less delightful, a subject only less rich, than that.

When Mr. Browning was a mere boy, it is recorded that he debated within himself whether he should not become a painter or a musician as well as a poet. Finally, though not, I believe, for a good many years, he decided in the negative. But the latent qualities of painter and musician have developed themselves in his poetry, and much of his finest and very much of his most original verse is that which speaks the language of painter and musician as it had never before been spoken. No English poet in any age has ever excelled his utterances on music, none has so much as rivalled his utterances on art. *Abt Vogler* is the richest, deepest, fullest poem on music in the language. It is not the theories of the poet, but the instincts of the musician, that it speaks. *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*, another special poem on music, is unparalleled for ingenuity of technical interpretation: *A Toccata of Galuppi's* is as rare a rendering as can anywhere be found of the impressions and sensations caused by a musical piece: but *Abt Vogler* is a very glimpse into the heaven where music is born. In his poems on the sister arts of painting and sculpture—not in themselves more perfect in sympathy, though far greater in number, than those on music—he is simply the first to write of these arts as an artist might, if he could express his soul in words or rhythm. It has always been a fashion among poets to write about music, though scarcely any one but Shakespeare and Milton has done so to much purpose; it is now, owing to the influence of Rossetti—whose magic, however, was all his own, and whose mantle went down into the grave with him—a fashion to write about pictures. But indiscriminate sonneteering about pictures is one thing: Mr. Browning's attitude and insight into the plastic arts quite another. Poems like *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Pictor Ignotus*, have a revealing quality which is quite unique; tragedies or comedies of art, in a more personal and dramatic way than the musical poems, they are like

these in touching the springs of art itself. They may be compared with *Abt Vogler*. Poems of the order of *The Guardian Angel* are more comparable with *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, less absolutely creative and sheerly imaginative, but exquisite on a lower plane—the rendering of the impressions and sensations caused by a particular picture. *Old Pictures in Florence* is not unsimilar to *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*—critical, technical, lovingly learned, sympathetically quizzical. But Mr. Browning's artistic instinct and knowledge are manifested not only in special poems of this sort, but everywhere throughout his works. He writes of painters because he has a kinship with them. "Their pictures are windows through which he sees into their souls."

It is only natural that a poet with the instincts of a painter should be capable of superb landscape-painting in verse ; and we find in Mr. Browning this power. It is further evident that such a poet—a man who has chosen poetry instead of painting—must consider the latter art subordinate to the former, and it is only natural that we should find Mr. Browning subordinating the pictorial to the poetic capacity, and this more carefully than most other poets. His best landscapes are as brief as they are brilliant. They are as sabre-strokes, swift, sudden, flashing the light from their sweep, and striking straight to the heart. And they are never pushed into prominence for an effect of idle beauty, nor strewn about in the way of thoughtful or passionate utterance, like roses in a runner's path. They are subordinated always to the human interest ; blended, *fused* with it, so that a landscape in a poem of Mr. Browning's is literally a part of the emotion. The poetry of mere description is of all verse the dreariest and the most inept ; all poetry which describes in detail, however magnificent, palls on us when persisted in. "The art of the pen (we write on darkness) is to rouse the inward vision, instead of labouring with a Drop-scene brush, as if it were to the eye ;

because our flying minds cannot contain a protracted description. That is why the poets who spring imagination with a word or a phrase paint lasting pictures. The Shakespearean, the Dantesque, are in a line, two at most.* It is to this, the finest essence of landscape-painting, that most of Mr. Browning's landscapes belong. But in truth he can be as explicit as any one when he sees fit. Look at the poem of *The Englishman in Italy*. The whole piece is one long description, minute, careful and elaborated. Perhaps it is worth observing that the description is addressed to a child.

In the exercise of his power of placing a character or incident in a sympathetic setting, Mr. Browning shows himself, as I have pointed out, singularly skilful. He never avails himself of the dramatic poet's licence of vagueness as to surroundings: he sees them himself with instant and intense clearness, and stamps them as clearly on our brain. The picture calls up the mood. Here is the opening of one of his very earliest poems, *Porphyria's Lover* :—

“The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake,
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria.”

There, in five lines, is the scene and the mood, and in the sixth line Porphyria may enter. Take a middle-period poem, *A Serenade at the Villa*, for an instance of more deliberate description, flashed by the same fiery art :—

“That was I, you heard last night
When there rose no moon at all,
Nor, to pierce the strained and tight
Tent of heaven, a planet small :
Life was dead and so was light.

* *Diana of the Crossways*, vol. i., p. 339.

- "Not a twinkle from the fly,
 Not a glimmer from the worm.
 When the crickets stopped their cry,
 When the owls forebore a term,
 You heard music ; that was I.
- "Earth turned in her sleep with pain,
 Sultrily suspirèd for proof :
*In at heaven and out again,
 Lightning !—where it broke the roof,
 Bloodlike, some few drops of rain.*
- "What they could my words expressed,
 O my love, my all, my one !
 Singing helped the verses best,
 And when singing's best was done,
 To my lute I left the rest.
- "So wore night ; the East was gray,
 White the broad-faced hemlock-flowers ;
 There would be another day ;
 Ere its first of heavy hours
 Found me, I had passed away."

This tells enough to be an entire poem. It is not a description of the night and the lover : we are made to see them. The lines I have italicised are of the school of Dante or of Rembrandt. Their vividness overwhelms. In the latest poems, as in *Ivàn Ivànovitch* or *Ned Bratts*, we find the same swift sureness of touch. It is only natural that most of Mr. Browning's very finest landscapes are Italian.*

As a humorist in poetry, Mr. Browning takes rank with our greatest. His humour, like most of his qualities, is peculiar to himself, though no doubt Carlyle had something

* Italians, it is pleasant to remember, have warmly welcomed the poet who has known and loved Italy best. "Her town and country, her churches and her ruins, her sorrows and her hopes," said Prof. Nencioni in an admirable review twenty years ago, "are constantly sung by him. How he loves the land that inspires him he has shown by his long residence among us, and by the thrilling, almost lover-like tone with which he speaks of our dear country. 'Open my heart and you will see, Graved inside of it Italy,' as he exclaims in *De Gustibus*."—*Nuova Antologia*, July, 1867.

of it. It is of remarkably wide capacity, and ranges from the effervescence of pure fun and freak to that salt and briny laughter whose taste is bitterer than tears. Its full extent will be seen by comparing *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* with *Confessions*, or in the contrast of the two parts of *Holy-Cross Day*. We find the simplest form of humour—the jolly laughter of an unaffected nature, the effervescence of a sparkling and overflowing brain—in such poems as *Up at a Villa—Down in the City*, or *Pacchiarotto*, or *Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis*. *Fra Lippo Lippi* leans to this category, though it is infused with biting wit and stinging irony; for it is first and foremost the bubbling-up of a restless and irrepressibly comic nature—the born Bohemian compressed but not contained by the rough rope-girdle of the monk. He is Mr. Browning's finest figure of comedy. *Ned Bratts* is another admirable creation of true humour, tinged with the grotesque. In *A Lovers' Quarrel* and *Dis aliter Visum*, humour refines into passion. In *Bishop Blougram* it condenses into wit. The poem has a delightful well-bred irony; in *A Soul's Tragedy* irony smiles and stings; in *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*, it stabs with a thirsty point. In *Caliban upon Setebos* we have the pure grotesque, an essentially noble variety of art, admitting of the utmost refinement of workmanship. The *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* attains a new effect of grotesque: it is the comic tragedy of vituperative malevolence. *Holy-Cross Day* heightens the grotesque with pity, indignation and solemnity: *The Heretic's Tragedy* raises it to sublimity. Mr. Browning's satire is equally keen and kindly. It never condescends to raise laughter at infirmity, or at mere absurdities of manners; it respects human nature, but it convicts falsity by the revealing intensity of its illumination. Of cynicism, of the wit that preys upon carrion, there is less than nothing.

Of all poets Mr. Browning is the healthiest and manliest; he is one of the "substantial men" of whom Landor speaks. His genius is robust with vigorous blood, and his

tone has the cheeriness of intellectual health. The most subtle of minds, his is the least sickly. The wind that blows in his pages is no hot and languorous breeze, laden with scents and sweets, but a fresh salt wind blowing in from the sea. ✓ His poetry is a tonic; it braces and invigorates. "*Il fait vivre ses phrases*:" his verses live and throb with life. He is incomparably plentiful of vital heat; "so thoroughly and delightfully alive." This is an effect of art, and a moral impression. It brings us into his own presence, and stirs us with an answering warmth of life in the breathing pages. The keynote of his philosophy is:—

) "God's in his heaven,
All's right with the world!"

He has such a hopefulness of belief in human nature that he shrinks from no *man*, however clothed and cloaked in evil, ✓ however miry with stumblings and fallings. I am a man, he might say with the noblest utterance of antiquity, and I deem nothing alien that is human. His investigations of evil are profoundly consistent with an indomitable optimism. Any one can say "All's right with the world," when he looks at the smiling face of things, at comfortable prosperity and a decent morality. But the test of optimism is its sight of evil. Mr. Browning has fathomed it, and he can still hope, for he sees the reflection of the sun in the depths of every dull pool and puddle. This vivid hope and trust in man is bound up with a strong and strenuous faith in God. Mr. Browning's Christianity is wider than our creeds, and is all the more vitally Christian in that it never sinks into pietism. He is never didactic, but his faith is the root of his art, and transforms and transfigures it. Yet as a dramatic poet he is so impartial, and can express all creeds with so easy an interpretative accent, that it is possible to prove him (as Shakespeare has been proved) a believer in anything and a disbeliever in everything.

Such, so far as I can realise my conception of him, is Robert Browning ; and such the tenour of his work as a whole. It is time to pass from general considerations to particular ones ; from characteristics of the writer to characteristics of the poems. In the pages to follow I shall endeavour to present a critical chronicle of Mr. Browning's works ; not neglecting to give due information about each, but not confining myself to the mere giving of information. It is hoped that the quotations for which I may find room will practically illustrate and convincingly corroborate my remarks.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POEMS.

(1833—1885.)

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1. PAULINE ; a Fragment of a Confession.

[Published anonymously in 1833 ; first reprinted (the text unaltered) in *Poetical Works*, 6 vols., Smith, Elder and Co.,

- 1868 (Vol. I., pp. 1—41)].

Pauline was written at the age of twenty. Its prefatory motto from Cornelius Agrippa (dated "*London, January, 1833. V.A.XX.*") serves to convey a hint that the "confession" is dramatic, and at the same time lays claim to the indulgence due to the author's youth. These two points are stated plainly in the "exculpatory word" prefixed to the reprint in 1868. After mentioning the circumstances under which the revival of the poem was forced on him, Mr. Browning says :

"The thing was my earliest attempt at 'poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine,' which I have since written according to a scheme less extravagant and scale less impracticable than were ventured upon in this crude preliminary sketch—a sketch that, on reviewal, appears not altogether wide of some hint of the characteristic features of that particular *dramatis persona* it would fain have reproduced: good draughtsmanship, however, and right handling were far beyond the artist at that time."

The explanation was due, but not the "exculpation;" for the poem, whether considered on its own merits, or in its relation to the poet's development, richly deserved its place in the collected works. *Pauline* is the confession of an unnamed poet to the lady whom he loves, and whose name is given in the title. It is a sort of spiritual autobiography; a record of sensations and ideas, rather than of deeds. "The scenery is in the chambers of thought; the agencies are

powers and passions ; the events are transitions from one state of spiritual existence to another." There is a vagueness of outline about the speaker which is due partly, no doubt, to the immaturity of the writer, partly also to the too exclusive portraiture of inactive mood. The difficulty is acknowledged in a curious "editor's" note, written in French, and signed "Pauline," in which Mr. Browning offered a sort of explanatory criticism of his own work. So far as we can grasp his personality, the speaker appears to us a highly-gifted and on the whole right-natured man, but possessed of a morbid self-consciousness and a limitless yet indecisive ambition. Endowed with a highly poetic nature, yet without, as it seems, adequate concentrative power ; filled, at times, with a passionate yearning after God and good, yet morally unstable ; he has spent much of his strength in ineffectual efforts, and he is conscious of lamentable failure and mistake in the course of his past life. Specially does he recognise and mourn his "self-idolatry," which has isolated him from others, and confined him within the close and vitiated circle of his own selfhood. Led by some better impulse, he now turns to Pauline, and to the memory of a great and dearly-loved poet, spoken of as "Sun-treader," finding in these, the memory and the love, a quietude and a redemption.

The poet of the poem is an imaginary character, but it is possible to trace in this character some real traits of its creator. The lines on pp. 12-13 are certainly a piece of admirable self-portraiture ; allusions here and there have a personal significance. In this earliest poem we see the germ of almost all the qualities (humour excepted) which mark Mr. Browning's mature work. Intensity of religious belief, love of music, of painting, and of the Greek classics ; insight into nature, a primary interest in and intense insight into the human soul—these are already manifest. No characteristic is more interesting in the light of far subsequent achievement than the familiarity with Greek literature, shown not

merely by the reference to Plato on pp. 17-19, and to Agamemnon on p. 23, but by what is perhaps the finest passage in the poem, the one ending :—

“ Yet I say, never morn broke clear as those
On the dim clustered isles in the blue sea,
The deep groves and white temples and wet caves :
And nothing ever will surprise me now—
Who stood beside the naked Swift-footed,
Who bound my forehead with Proserpine's hair.”

The enthusiasm which breathes through whole pages of address to the “Sun-treader” affords no exaggerated picture of Mr. Browning's love and reverence for Shelley, whose *Alastor* might well be compared with *Pauline*. The rhythm of Mr. Browning's poem has a certain echo in it of Shelley's earlier blank verse ; and the lyrically emotional descriptions and the vivid and touching metaphors derived from nature frequently remind us of Shelley, and sometimes of Keats. On every page we meet with magical touches like this :—

“ Thou wilt remember one warm morn when winter
Crept aged from the earth, and spring's first breath
Blew soft from the moist hills ; the black-thorn boughs,
So dark in the bare wood, when glistening
In the sunshine were white with coming buds,
Like the bright side of a sorrow, and the banks
Had violets opening from sleep like eyes ; ”

with lines full of exquisite fancy, such as those on the woodland tarn ;—

“ The trees bend
O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl ; ”

and in one place we have a marvellously graphic description, extending over three pages, perhaps the most elaborately painted landscape in Mr. Browning's works. It seems like wronging the poem to speak of its *promise* : it is, indeed, far

from mature, but it has a superb precocity marking a certain stage of ripeness. It is lacking, certainly, as Mr. Browning himself declares, in "good draughtsmanship and right handling," but this defect of youth is richly compensated by the wealth of inspiration, the keen intellectual and ethical insight, and the numberless lines of haunting charm, which have nothing of youth in them but its vigorous freshness.

2. PARACELUS.

[Published in 1835; first acknowledged work (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. I., pp. 43—205). The original MS. is in the Forster Library at South Kensington.]

THE poem is divided into five scenes, each a typical episode in the life of Paracelsus. It is in the form of dialogue between Paracelsus and others: Festus and his wife Michal in the first scene, Aprile, an Italian poet, in the second, and Festus only in the remainder. The poem is followed by an appendix, containing a few notes and a brief biography of Paracelsus, translated from the *Biographie Universelle*.

As an historical study of the pioneer of modern chemists, the poem is a brilliant and solid success, anticipating, it is said, the mature view of modern medical men. But the historical element is less important than the philosophical; both are far less important than the purely poetical. The leading motive is not unlike that of *Pauline* and of *Sordello*: it is handled, however, far more ably than in the former, and much more clearly than in the latter. Paracelsus is a portrait of the seeker after knowledge, one whose ambition transcends all earthly limits, and exhausts itself in the thirst of the impossible. His career is traced from its noble outset at Würzburg to its miserable close in the hospital at Salzburg, through all its course of struggle, con-

quest and deterioration. His last effort, the superb dying speech, gives the moral of his mistake, and, in the light of the new intuition flashed on his soul by death, the true conception of the powers and limits of man.

The character and mental vicissitudes of Paracelsus are brought out, as has been stated, in dialogue with others. The three minor characters, though probably called into being as mere foils to the protagonist, have a distinct individuality of their own. Michal is Mr. Browning's first sketch of a woman. She is faint in outline and very quiet in presence, but though she scarcely speaks twenty lines, her face remains with us like a beautiful face seen once and never to be forgotten. There is something already, in her tentative delineation, of that "piercing and overpowering tenderness which glorifies the poet of Pompilia." Festus, Michal's husband, the friend and adviser of Paracelsus, is a man of simple nature and thoughtful mind, cautious yet not cold, clear-sighted rather than far-seeing, yet not without enthusiasm; perhaps a little narrow and commonplace, as the prudent are apt to be. He, like Michal, has no influence on the external action of the poem. Aprile, the Italian poet whom Paracelsus encounters in the second scene, is an integral part of the poem; for it is through him that a crisis is reached in the development of the seeker after knowledge. Unlike Festus and Michal, he is a type rather than a realisable human being—type of the Artist pure and simple, the lover of beauty and of beauty alone, a soul immoderately possessed with the desire to love, as Paracelsus with the desire to know. He flickers, an expiring flame, across the pathway of the stronger spirit, one luminous moment and no more.

Paracelsus, though written in dialogue, is not intended to be a drama. This was clearly stated in the preface to the first edition, an important document, never afterwards reprinted. "Instead of having recourse," wrote Mr. Browning,

"to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded."* The proportions of the work are epical rather than dramatic ; but indeed it is difficult to class, so exuberant is the vitality which fills and overflows all limits. What is not a drama, though in dialogue, nor yet an epic, except in length, can scarcely be considered, any more than its successors, and perhaps imitators, *Festus*, *Balder*, *A Life Drama*, etc., properly artistic in form. But it is distinguished from this prolific progeny not only by a finer and firmer imagination, a truer poetic richness, but by a moderation, a concreteness, a grip, which are certainly all its own. In few of Mr. Browning's poems are there so many individual lines and single passages which we are so apt to pause on, to read again and again, for the mere enjoyment of their splendid sound and colour. And this for a reason. The large and lofty character of *Paracelsus*, the avoidance of much external detail, and the high tension at which thought and emotion are kept throughout, permit the poet to use his full resources of style and diction without producing an effect of unreality and extravagance. We meet on almost every page with lines like these :—

" Ask the gier-eagle why she stoops at once
 Into the vast and unexplored abyss,
 What full-grown power informs her from the first,
 Why she not marvels, strenuously beating
 The silent boundless regions of the sky."

Or again, lines such as these—lines which have come to possess a strange and pathetic interest—Gordon's favourite passage, it is said, in Browning :—

* See the whole Preface, Appendix II.

“ I go to prove my soul !
 I see my way as birds their trackless way.
 I shall arrive ! what time, what circuit first,
 I ask not : but unless God send his hail
 Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,
 In some time, his good time, I shall arrive :
 He guides me and the bird. In his good time ! ”

Not on every page do we find such a passage as the following—one that it would be hard to equal, not merely in this, but in any poem of Mr. Browning's, or, indeed, in any modern poem whatever :—

“ The centre-fire heaves underneath the earth,
 And the earth changes like a human face ;
 The molten ore bursts up among the rocks,
 Winds into the stone's heart, outbranches bright
 In hidden mines, spots barren river-beds,
 Crumbles into fine sand where sunbeams bask—
 God joys therein. The wrath sea's waves are edged
 With foam, white as the bitten lip of hate,
 When, in the solitary waste, strange groups
 Of young volcanos come up, cyclops-like,
 Staring together with their eyes on flame—
 God tastes a pleasure in their uncouth pride.
 Then all is still ; earth is a wintry clod :
 But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passe
 Over its breast to waken it, rare verdure
 Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between
 The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,
 Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face ;
 The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with blooms
 Like chrysalids impatient for the air,
 The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run
 Along the furrows, ants make their ado ;
 Above, birds fly in merry flocks, the lark
 Soars up and up, shivering for very joy ;
 Afar the ocean sleeps ; white fishing-gulls
 Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe
 Of nested limpets ; savage creatures seek
 Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews
 His ancient rapture. ”

The blank verse of *Paracelsus* is varied by four lyrics—the spirit-song of the unfaithful poets, “Lost, lost! yet come,” the two stanzas beginning, “Heap cassia,” etc., “Over the sea,” and “Thus the Mayne glideth.” These songs have a perfection of touch and tone, of melody and imagery, which Mr. Browning has seldom or never excelled; and there is no finer thing of its kind in the language than the lines beginning “Over the sea.”

3. STRAFFORD: an Historical Tragedy.

[Written toward the close of 1836; acted at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (*Strafford*, Mr. Macready; *Countess of Carlisle*, Miss Helen Faucit), May 1, 1837; published in 1837 (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. I., pp. 207—310)].

Strafford was written, at Macready's earnest request, in an interval of the composition of *Sordello*. Like all Mr. Browning's plays which saw the boards, it owed its partial non-success to causes quite apart from its own merits, causes which need not be dwelt on here. Mr. Gosse has given a full account of Mr. Browning's connection with the stage in his article on “The Early Writings of Robert Browning,” published in *The Century Magazine*, December, 1881. The article is of value, on account of the light it throws on a much misunderstood subject.

In his preface to the first edition (reprinted in Appendix II.) Mr. Browning states that he believes the historical portraits to be faithful. This is to a considerable extent confirmed by Professor Gardiner, our best living authority on the Stuart period, who has given a careful consideration of the play in its historical aspects, in his Introduction to Miss Hickey's annotated edition (G. Bell & Sons, 1884). As a representation of history, he tells us, it is inaccurate; “the very roots of the situation are untrue to fact.” But (as he allows) this departure from fact, in the conduct of the

action, is intentional, and, of course, allowable : Mr. Browning was writing a drama, not a history. Of the portraits—the really vital part of the play as an interpretation of history—he writes :—

“For myself, I can only say that, every time I read the play, I feel more convinced that Mr. Browning has seized the real Strafford, the man of critical brain, of rapid decision, and tender heart, who strove for the good of his nation, without sympathy for the generation in which he lived. Charles, too, with his faults perhaps exaggerated, is, nevertheless, a real Charles. . . . There is a wonderful parallelism between the Lady Carlisle of the play and the less noble Lady Carlisle which history conjectures rather than describes. . . . On the other hand, Pym is the most unsatisfactory, from an historical point of view, of the leading personages.”

While it is interesting to know the historical basis and probable accuracy of Mr. Browning's play, these considerations are not really of primary importance. The whole interest is centred in the character of Strafford ; it is a personal interest, and attaches itself to the personal character of the hero. The leading motive is Strafford's devotion to his king, and the note of tragic discord arises from the ingratitude and faithlessness of Charles set over against the blind fidelity of his minister. The antagonism of law and despotism, of Pym and Strafford, is, perhaps, less clearly and forcibly brought out ; though essential to the plot, it wears to our sight a somewhat secondary aspect. Strafford himself appears not so much a superb and unbending figure, a political power, as a man whose service of Charles is due wholly to an intense personal affection, and not at all to his national sympathies, which seem, indeed, rather on the opposite side. He loves the man, not the king, and his love is a freak of the affections. That it is against his better reason he recognises, but the recognition fails to influence his heart or his conduct. This is finely expressed in the following lines, spoken by Lady Carlisle :—

“ Could you but know what 'tis to bear, my friend,
One image stamped within you, turning blank
The else imperial brilliance of your mind,—
A weakness, but most precious,—like a flaw
I' the diamond, which should shape forth some sweet face
Yet to create, and meanwhile treasured there
Lest nature lose her gracious thought for ever ! ”

Mr. Browning has rarely drawn a more pathetic figure. Every circumstance that could contribute to this effect is skilfully seized and emphasised : Charles's incredibly selfish weakness, the implacable sternness of Pym, the *triste* prattle of Strafford's children and their interrupted joyous song in the final scene—all serve to heighten our feeling of affectionate pity and regret. The imaginary former friendship between Pym and Strafford adds still more to the pathos of the delineation, and gives rise to some of the finest speeches, notably the last great colloquy between these two, which so effectively rounds and ends the play. The fatal figure of Pym is impressive and admirable throughout, and the portrait of the Countess of Carlisle—Mr. Browning's second portrait of a woman—is a noble and singularly original one. Her unrecognised and undeterred devotion to Strafford is finely and tenderly pathetic ; it has the sorrowful dignity of faithful service, rewarded only in serving. The play is full of incident, especially in the third act. But the crowning merit lies in the language and style of the dialogue. There is no aim at historical dignity or poetical elaboration ; the aim is nature, warm nature, quick with personal passion. Every word throbs with emotion ; through these exclamatory, yet how delicate and subtle lines, we seem actually to see and hear the speakers—to see and hear them with surprising vividness. The words supply their own accents, looks and gestures.

4. SORDELLO.

[Published in 1840 (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. II., pp. 1—217)].

Sordello is generally spoken of as being the most obscure and the least attractive of Mr. Browning's poems; it has even been called "the most illegible production of any time or country." Hard, very hard, it undoubtedly is; but undoubtedly it is far from unattractive to the serious student of poetry, who will find in it something of the fascination of an Alpine peak: not to be gained without an effort, treacherous and slippery, painfully dazzling to weak eyes, but for all that irresistibly fascinating. *Sordello* contains material enough to set up a dozen considerable poets; indeed, its very fault lies in its plethora of ideas—the breathless crowd of hurrying thoughts and fancies which fill and overflow it. That this is not properly to be called "obscurity" has been triumphantly shown by Mr. Swinburne (among others) in his essay on George Chapman. Some of his admirable statements I have already quoted, but we may bear to be told twice that Mr. Browning is too much the reverse of obscure, that he is only too brilliant and subtle, that he never thinks but at full speed. But besides this characteristic, which is common to all his work, there are one or two special reasons which have made this particular poem more difficult than others. The condensation of style which had marked Mr. Browning's previous work, and which has marked his later, was here—in consequence of an unfortunate and most unnecessary dread of verbosity, induced by a rash and foolish critique—accentuated not infrequently into dislocation. The very unfamiliar historical events of the story* are intro-

* "Mr. Browning prepared himself for writing *Sordello*," says Mrs. Orr, "by studying all the chronicles of that period of Italian history which the British Museum contained; and we may be sure that every event he

duced, too, in a parenthetical and allusive way, not a little embarrassing to the reader. But it is also evident that the difficulties of a gigantic conception were not completely conquered by the writer's genius, not then fully matured; that lack of entire mastery over the material has frequently caused the two interests of the poem, the psychological and the historical, to clash—the background to intrude on and confuse the middle distance, if not even the foreground itself. Every one of these faults is the outcome of a merit: altogether they betray a growing nature of extraordinary power, largeness and richness, not as yet to be bound or contained within any limits or in any bonds.

Sordello is a psychological epic. But to call it this only would be to do it somewhat less than justice. Its brilliant mediæval paintings are of themselves enough to give it distinction. The in- and out-door views which stud its pages are remarkable for vivid and picturesque beauty, for sharpness of outline and splendour of colouring, even in Mr. Browning's works. Landscapes such as those on pp. 35, 39, 98—the touches or flashes of sudden revelation, as on pp. 78 and 85, to name no others—are surely unique in the modern poetry of description. And such lines as the following (which are introduced merely as a simile), have a poetic quality of a very rare and subtle order:—

“As, shall I say, some Ethiop, past pursuit
Of all enslavers, dips a shackled foot
Burnt to the blood, into the drowsy black
Enormous watercourse which guides him back
To his own tribe again, where he is king;
And laughs because he guesses, numbering
The yellower poison-wattles on the pouch
Of the first lizard wrested from its couch

alludes to as historical, is so in spirit, if not in the letter; while such details as come under the head of historical curiosities are absolutely true. He also supplemented his reading by a visit to the places in which the scenes of the story are laid.”—*Handbook*, p. 31.

Under the slime (whose skin, the while, he strips
To cure his nostril with, and festered lips,
And eyeballs bloodshot through the desert-blast)
That he has reached its boundary, at last
May breathe ;—thinks o'er enchantments of the South
Sovereign to plague his enemies, their mouth,
Eyes, nails, and hair ; but, these enchantments tried
In fancy, puts them soberly aside
For truth, projects a cool return with friends,
The likelihood of winning mere amends
Ere long ; thinks that, takes comfort silently,
Then, from the river's brink, his wrongs and he,
Hugging revenge close to their hearts, are soon
Off-striding for the Mountains of the Moon."

But while much of the finest poetry is contained in picturesque passages such as these, we find verse of another order, thrilling as the trumpet's "golden cry," in the passionate invocation of Dante, enshrining the magnificently Dantesque characterization of the three divisions of the *Divina Commedia*.

" For he—for he,
Gate-vein of this hearts' blood of Lombardy,
(If I should falter now)—for he is thine !
Sordello, thy forerunner, Florentine !
A herald-star I know thou didst absorb
Relentless into the consummate orb
That scared it from its right to roll along
A sempiternal path with dance and song
Fulfilling its allotted period,
Serenest of the progeny of God—
Who yet resigns it not ! His darling stoops
With no quenched lights, desponds with no blank troops
Of disenfranchised brilliances, for, blent
Utterly with thee, its shy element
Like thine upburneth prosperous and clear.
Still, what if I approach the august sphere
Named now with only one name, disentwine
That under-current soft and argentine
From its fierce mate in the majestic mass
Leavened as the sea whose fire was mixt with glass

In John's transcendent vision,—launch once more
 That lustre? *Dante, pacer of the shore*
Where glutton hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,
Unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume—
Or whence the grieved and obscure waters slope
Into a darkness quieted by hope;
Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God's eye
In gracious twilights where his chosen lie,
 I would do this! If I should falter now!"

Mr. Browning has himself told us that his stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. The portrait of Sordello is one of the most elaborate and complete which he has given us. It is painted with more accessory detail and on a larger canvas than any other single figure. Like *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, with which it has points of affinity, the poem is a study of ambition and of egoism; of a soul "whose ambition," as it has been rightly said, "is in extravagant disproportion to its physical powers and means, and whose temptation is at every crisis to seek pleasure in the picture of willing and doing rather than in willing and doing itself." Sordello's youth is fed upon fancy: he imagines himself Apollo, this or that hero of the time; in dreams he is and does to the height of his aspirations. But from any actual doing he shrinks; at the approach or the call of action, his will refuses to act. We might sum up his character in a general sense by saying that his imagination overpowers every other faculty; an imagination intensely personal, a sort of intellectual egoism, which removes him equally from action and from sympathy. He looks on men as foils to himself, or as a background on which to shine. But the root of his failure is this—and it is one which could never be even apprehended by a vulgar egoism—he longs to grasp the whole of life at once, to realise his aims in their entirety, without complying with the necessary conditions. His mind perceives the infinite and essential so clearly that it scorns or spurns the mere accidents. But earth being

earth, and life growth, and accidents an inevitable part of life, the rule remains that man, to attain, must climb step by step, and not expect to fly at once to the top of the ladder. Finding that he cannot do everything, Sordello sees no alternative but to do nothing. Consequently his state comes to be a virtual indolence or inactivity; though it is in reality that of the top, spinning so fast that its motion is imperceptible. Poet and man of action—for he contains more than the germ of both—confound and break down one another. He meets finally with a great temptation, conquers it, but dies of the effort. For the world his life has been a failure, for himself not absolutely so, since, before his eyes were closed, he was permitted to see the truth and to recognise it. But in all his aims, in all his ambitions, he has failed; and the world has gained nothing from them or from him but the warning of his example.

This Sordello of Mr. Browning seems to have little identity with the brief and splendid Sordello of Dante, the figure that fronts us in the superb sixth canto of the *Purgatorio*, "*a guisa di leon quando si posa*." The records of the real Sordello are fragmentary, contradictory, and pitifully scant. No coherent outline of his personality remains, so that Mr. Browning's character is a creation as absolute as if it had had birth in the poetic consciousness alone. The name indeed of Sordello, embalmed in Dante's verse, is still fresh to our ears after the "ravage of six long sad hundred years," and it is Dante, too, who in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* has further signalised him by honourable record. Sordello, he says, excelled in all kinds of composition, and by his experiments in the dialects of Cremona, Brescia and Verona, cities near Mantua, helped to form the Tuscan tongue. But besides the brief record of Dante, there are certain accounts of Sordello's life, very confused and conflicting, in the early Italian Chronicles and the Provençal lives of the Troubadours. Tiraboschi sifts these legends,

leaving very little of them. According to him, Sordello was a Mantuan of noble family, born at Goito at the close of the twelfth century. He was a poet and warrior, though not, as some reports profess, captain-general or governor of Mantua. He eloped with Cunizza, the wife of Count Richard of St. Boniface; at some period of his life he went into Provence; and he died a violent death, about the middle of the thirteenth century. The works attributed to him are poems in Tuscan and Provençal, a work in Latin named *Thesaurus Thesaurorum*, an essay in Provençal on "The Progress and Power of the Kings of Aragon in the Comté of Provence," a treatise on "The Defence of Walled Towns," and some historical translations from Latin into the vulgar tongue. Of all these works only thirty-four poems in Provençal—*sirventes* and *tensons*—survive: some of the finest of them are satires.*

The statement that Sordello was specially famed for his philosophical verses, though not confirmed by what remains of his poetry, is interesting and significant in connection with Mr. Browning's conception of his character. There is little however in the scanty tales we have of the historic Sordello to suggest the "feverish poet" of the poem. The fugitive personality of the half mythical minstrel-warrior eludes the grasp, and Mr. Browning has rather given the name of Sordello to an imagined type of the poetic character than constructed a type of character to fit the name. Still less are the dubious attributes with which the bare facts of history or legend invest Cunizza (whom, none the less, Dante spoke with in heaven) recognisable in the exquisite and all-golden loveliness of Palma.

* For the brief summary here attempted I am indebted to a paper on the life and works of Sordello, by Mrs. C. H. Dall, the only attempt yet made, so far as I am aware, to collect and present the real or recorded facts. The article was originally printed in an American magazine: Mrs. Dall has since republished it in a pamphlet for private circulation; for a copy of which I am indebted to her kind courtesy.

5. PIPPA PASSES.

[Published in 1841 as No. 1 of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. II., pp. 219-287)].

Pippa Passes is Mr. Browning's most perfect work. As a whole, he has never written anything to equal it in artistic symmetry; while a single scene—that between Ottima and Sebald—reaches the highest level of tragic utterance which he has ever attained. The plan of the work is quite original; it is something between a drama and a masque, and is both dramatic and lyrical. The leading motive—Pippa's "passing" from group to group, acting unwittingly on the conscience of some one hearer of her songs—is said to have occurred to Mr. Browning as he was walking alone in a wood near Dulwich. "The image flashed upon him," says Mrs. Orr, "of some one walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it; and the image shaped itself into the little silk-winder of Asolo, Felippa or Pippa."* It is this motive that makes unity in variety, linking together a sequence of otherwise independent scenes. The poem is the story of Pippa's New Year's Day holiday, her one holiday in all the year. She resolves to fancy herself to be in turn the four happiest people in Asolo, and, to realise her fancy as much as she can, she spends her day in wandering about the town, passing, in the morning, the shrub-house up the hillside, where Ottima and her lover, Sebald, have met; at noon, the house of Jules, over Orcana; in the evening, the turret on the hill above Asolo, where are Luigi and his mother; and at night, the palace by the Duomo, now tenanted by Monsignor the Bishop. These, whom she imagines to be the happiest people in the town, have all, in reality, arrived at crises of tremendous and tragic

* *Handbook*, p. 54.

importance to themselves, and, in one instance, to her. Each stands at the turning-point of a life: Ottima and Sebald, unrepentant, with a crime behind them; Jules and Phene, two souls brought strangely face to face by a fate which may prove their salvation or their perdition; Luigi, irresolute, with a purpose to be performed; Monsignor, undecided, before a great temptation. Pippa passes, singing, at the moment when these souls' tragedies seem tending to a fatal end, at the moment when the baser nature seems about to triumph over the better. Something in the song, "like any flash that cures the blind," strikes them with a sudden light, and they see and decide for good. Pippa passes on, unconscious of the influence she has exerted, as they are but half-aware of the agency of what they take as an immediate word from God. Each of these four scenes is in dialogue, the first three in blank verse, the last in prose. They are preceded or followed by minor intermediate scenes, in prose and verse, representing the "talk by the way," of art-students, Austrian police, and poor girls, all bearing on some part of the action. Pippa's prologue and epilogue, like her songs, are in varied lyric verse, "lyrical episodes and seed-pearls of song," of which, says Mr. Gosse, in the article previously referred to, "it is a commonplace to say that nothing more exquisite or natural was ever written, or rather warbled."

Of the four principal scenes, by far the greatest is the first—that between Ottima and her paramour, the German Sebald, on the morning after the murder of old Luca Gaddi, the woman's husband. It is difficult to convey in words any notion of its supreme excellence of tragic truth: to match it we must revert to almost the very finest Elizabethan work. The representation of Ottima and Sebald, the Italian and the German, is a singularly acute study of the Italian and German races. Sebald, in a sudden access of brutal rage, has killed the old doting husband, but his conscience,

too feeble to stay his hand before, is awake to torture him after the deed. But Ottima is steadfast in evil, with the Italian conscienceless resoluteness. She can no more feel either fear or remorse than Clytæmnestra. The scene between Jules, the French sculptor, and his bride Phene,* and that between Luigi, the light-headed Italian patriot, and his mother, are scarcely less fine and finished in a somewhat slighter style. Both are full of colour and music, of intense insight into nature and into art, and of superb lines and passages, such as this, which is spoken by Luigi:—

✓ “ God must be glad one loves his world so much.
 I can give news of earth to all the dead
 Who ask me :—last year’s sunsets, and great stars
 That had a right to come first and see ebb
 The crimson wave that drifts the sun away—
 Those crescent moons with notched and burning rims
 That strengthened into sharp fire, and there stood,
 Impatient of the azure—and that day
 In March, a double rainbow stopped the storm—
 May’s warm slow yellow moonlit summer nights—
 Gone are they, but I have them in my soul ! ”

But in neither is there any single passage of such incomparable quality as the thunderstorm in the first scene—a storm not to be matched in English poetry:—

“ Buried in woods we lay, you recollect ;
 Swift ran the searching tempest overhead ;
 And ever and anon some bright white shaft
 Burned through the pine-tree roof, here burned and there,
 As if God’s messenger through the close wood screen
 Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture,
 Feeling for guilty thee and me : then broke
 The thunder like a whole sea overhead.”

The vivid colloquial scenes in prose have much of that pungent semi-satirical humour of which Mr. Browning

* This scene seems to have been suggested by a striking episode in Diderot’s *Jacques le Fataliste*.

had shown the first glimpse in *Sordello*. Besides these, there is one intermediate scene, in verse—the talk of the “poor girls” on the Duomo steps—which seems to me one of the most pathetic things ever written by the most pathetic of contemporary poets. It is this scene that contains the exquisite song, “You’ll love me yet.”

“You’ll love me yet !—and I can tarry
Your love’s protracted growing :
June reared that bunch of flowers you carry,
From seeds of April’s sowing.

I plant a heartfull now : some seed
At least is sure to strike,
And yield —what you’ll not pluck indeed,
Not love, but, may be, like.

You’ll look at least on love’s remains,
A grave’s one violet :
Your look?—that pays a thousand pains.
What’s death ? You’ll love me yet !”

6. KING VICTOR AND KING CHARLES. A Tragedy.

[Published in 1842 as No. II. of *Bells and Pomegranats*, although written some years earlier (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. III., pp. 1—72)].

King Victor and King Charles is an historical tragedy, dealing with the last episode in the career of Victor II., first king of Sardinia. Mr. Browning says in his preface :

“So far as I know, this tragedy is the first artistic consequence of what Voltaire termed ‘a terrible event without consequences ;’ and although it professes to be historical, I have taken more pains to arrive at the history than most readers would thank me for particularising : since acquainted, as I will hope them to be, with the chief circumstances of Victor’s remarkable European career—nor quite ignorant of the sad and surprising facts I am about to reproduce (a tolerable account of which is to be found, for instance, in Abbé Roman’s *Récit*, or even the fifth of Lord Orrery’s *Letters from Italy*)—I cannot expect them to be versed, nor desirous of becoming so, in all the details of the memoirs, correspondence, and relations of the time. . . . When I say, therefore,

that I cannot but believe my statement (combining as it does what appears correct in Voltaire and plausible in Condorcet) more true to person and thing than any it has hitherto been my fortune to meet with, no doubt my word will be taken, and my evidence spared as readily."

The episode recorded in the play is the abdication of Victor in favour of his son Charles, and his subsequent attempt to return to the throne. The only point in which Mr. Browning has departed from history is the very effective death on the stage which replaces the old king's real death in captivity a year later. It is a pity that *King Victor and King Charles* has never been acted, for it was evidently written for the stage, and ought to succeed there. There is plenty of bustle and movement, scarcely a speech that would need curtailment, and very little embellishment or embroidery of any kind, while several scenes, striking indeed in reading, would be considerably more impressive on the stage. As a piece of literature, it is the least interesting and valuable of Mr. Browning's dramas.

The interest of the play is, even more than that of *Strafford*, political. The intrigue turns on questions of government, complicated with questions of relationship and duty. The conflict is one between ruler and ruler, who are also father and son: and the true tragedy of the situation seems to be this: shall Charles obey the instincts of a son, and cede to his father's wish to resume the government he has abdicated, or is there a higher duty which he is bound to follow—the duty of a king to his people? The motive is a fine one, but it is scarcely handled with Mr. Browning's accustomed skill and subtlety. King Victor—of whose "fiery and audacious temper, unscrupulous selfishness, profound dissimulation, and singular fertility in resources," Mr. Browning speaks in his preface—is an impressive study of "the old age of crafty men,"—the futile wiliness of decrepit and persevering craft,—though we are scarcely made to feel the once potent personality of the man, or to understand the

influence which his mere word or presence still has upon his son. D'Ormea, who checkmates all the schemes of his old master, is a most curious and subtle study of one who "serves God at the devil's bidding," as he himself confesses in the cynical frankness of his continual ironical self-criticism. After twenty years of unsuccessful intrigue, he has learnt by experience that honesty is the best policy. But at every step his evil reputation clogs and impedes his honest action, and the very men whom he is now most sincere in helping are the most mistrustful of his sincerity. Charles, whose good intentions and vacillating will are the precise opposites of his father's strong will and selfish purposes, is really the central figure of the play. He is one of those men whom we at once despise and respect. Gifted with many good qualities, he seems to lack the one thing needful to bind them together. Polyxena, his wife, possesses just that resolution in which he is wanting. She is a fine, firm, clear character, herself admirable, and admirably drawn. Her "noble and right woman's manliness" (to use Mr. Browning's phrase) is prompt to sweep away the cobwebs that are wont to entangle her husband's path or obscure his vision of things. From first to last she sees through Charles, Victor and D'Ormea, who neither understand one another nor perhaps themselves; from first to last she is the same clear-headed, decisive, consistent woman, loyal always to love, but always yet more loyal toward truth.

7. DRAMATIC LYRICS.*

[Published in 1842 as No. III. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, dispersedly in Vols. III., IV. and V.).]

Dramatic Lyrics, Mr. Browning's first volume of short poems, contains some of his finest, and many of his most

* It should be stated here that the three collections of miscellaneous poems published in 1842, 1845 and 1855, and named respectively *Dramatic*

popular pieces. There is not a line which can possibly require a second reading before its full meaning is grasped, while one or two of the poems, if not more, are masterpieces of the ripest maturity. The little volume—it was only sixteen pages in length—has, however, an importance even beyond its actual worth; for we can trace in it the germ at least of most of Mr. Browning's subsequent work. We see in these poems for the first time that extraordinary mastery of rhyme which Butler himself has not excelled; that predilection for the grotesque which is shared by no other English poet; and, not indeed for the first time, but for the first time with any special prominence, the strong and thoughtful humour, running up and down the whole compass of its gamut, gay and hearty, satirical and incisive, in turn. We see also the first formal beginning of the dramatic monologue, which, hinted at in *Pauline*, disguised in *Paracelsus*, and developed, still disguised, in *Sordello*, became, from the period of the *Dramatic Lyrics* onward, the staple form and special instrument of the poet—an instrument finely touched, at times, by other performers, but of which he is the only Liszt. The literal beginning of the monologue must be found in two lyrical poems, here included—*Johannes Agricola* and *Porphyria's Lover* (originally named *Madhouse Cells*), which were published in a magazine as early as 1836, or about the time of the publication of *Paracelsus*. These extraordinary little poems reveal not only an imagination of intense fire and heat, but an almost finished art—a power of conceiving subtle mental complexities with clearness and of expressing them in a picturesque form and in perfect lyric language. Each poem renders a single mood, and renders it completely.

Lyrics, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, and Men and Women, were in 1863 broken up and the poems re-distributed. I shall take the volumes as they originally appeared; a reference to the list of contents of the edition of 1863, given in the Bibliography at the end of this book, will enable the reader to find any poem in its present locality.

But it is still only a mood: *My Last Duchess* is a life. This poem—it was at first one of two companion pieces called *Italy and France*—is the first *direct* progenitor of *Andrea del Sarto* and the other great blank verse monologues; in it we see the form, save for the scarcely appreciable presence of rhyme, already developed. The poem is a subtle study in the jealousy of egoism—not a study so much as a creation; and it places before us, as if bitten out by the etcher's acid, a typical autocrat of the Renaissance, with his serene self-composure of selfishness, quiet unpromising cruelty, and genuine devotion to art. The scene and the actors in this little Italian drama stand out before us with the most natural clearness; there is some telling touch in every line, an infinitude of cunningly careless details, instinct with suggestion, and an appearance through it all of simple artless ease, such as only the very finest art can give. But let the poem speak for itself.

“MY LAST DUCHESS.

“FERRARA.

“That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
'Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
'Must never hope to reproduce the faint

'Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
 'Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 'Or there exceed the mark,'—and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 —E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat
 The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!"

A poem of quite another order of art, a life-like sketch rather than a creation, is found in *Waring*. The original of

Waring was one of Mr. Browning's friends, Mr. Alfred Domett, the author of *Ranolf and Amohia*, etc., then or afterwards Prime Minister in New Zealand. The poem contains a vivid picture of the author's early life in London. It is written in a semi-colloquial style, never without charm, and lightened and brightened here and there by really exquisite lyric snatches. The abundant humour is of a very genial kind; in another poem, now known as *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, the humour is grotesque, bitter and pungent, the humour of hate. The snarling monk of the Spanish cloister pours out on poor, innocent, unsuspecting "Brother Lawrence," a wealth of really choice and masterly vituperation, not to be matched out of Shakespeare. The poem is a clever study of that mood of active disgust which most of us have felt toward some possibly inoffensive enough person, but one whose every word, look or action jars on our tenderest nerves. It flashes, too, a brilliant comic light on the natural tendencies of asceticism. Side by side with this poem, under the general name of *Camp and Cloister*, was published the vigorous and touching little ballad now known as *Incident of the French Camp*—a stirring lyric of war, such as Mr. Browning knows well how to write, comparatively seldom as he has attempted it. The ringing *Cavalier Tunes* (so graphically set to music by Dr. Villiers Stanford) strike the same note; so, too, does the wonderfully clever little riding poem, *Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr*, a *tour de force* strung together on a single rhyme—"As I ride, as I ride."

Count Gismond, the companion of *My Last Duchess*, is a fine piece of narrative verse, infused with the true mediæval spirit. It reads not unlike some of the remarkable studies of the Middle Ages contained in Mr. Wm. Morris's early volume of poems (*The Defence of Guenevere*), published sixteen years later. The mediæval temper of entire confidence in the ordeal by duel has never been better rendered than

in these two stanzas, the very kernel of the poem, 'spoken by the falsely-accused girl :—

“ . . . Till out strode Gismond ; then I knew
That I was saved. I never met
His face before, but, at first view,
I felt quite sure that God had set
Himself to Satan ; who would spend
A minute's mistrust on the end ?

“ He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
With one back-handed blow that wrote
In blood men's verdict there. North, South
East, West, I looked. The lie was dead,
And damned, and truth stood up instead.”

The two aspects of *Queen-Worship* are scarcely among the best poems in the volume, though *Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli* has a mournfully sweet pathos in its lingering lines, and *Cristina*, not without a touch of vivid passion, contains that personal conviction afterwards enshrined in the lovelier casket of *Evelyn Hope*. *Artemis Prologuizes* is Mr. Browning's only experiment in the classic style. The fragment which is all we have was destined to become part of a longer work, taking up the legend of Hippolytus at the point where Euripides dropped it. It was in this poem that Mr. Browning first adopted the Greek spelling of proper names, a practice which he has since carried out, with greater consistency, in his transcripts from that language.

Perhaps the gem of the *Dramatic Lyrics* is the little lyric tragedy, *In a Gondola*, a poem which could hardly be surpassed in its perfect union or fusion of dramatic intensity with the most exquisite charm and variety of music. It was suggested by a picture of Maclise, and tells of two Venetian

* It is worth noticing, as a curious point in Mr. Browning's technique, that in the stanza (*ababcc*) in which this and some other of his poems are written, he almost always omits the pause customary at the end of the fourth line, running it into the fifth, and thus producing a novel metrical effect.

lovers, watched by a certain jealous "Three;" of their brief hour of happiness, and of the sudden vengeance of the Three. There is a brooding sense of peril over all the blithe and flitting fancies said or sung to one another by the lovers in their gondola; a sense, however, of future rather than of present peril, something of a zest and a piquant pleasure to them. The sudden tragic ending—anticipated yet unexpected—rounds the whole with a dramatic touch of fiery and infallible instinct. I know nothing with which the poem may be compared: its method and its magic are alike its own. We might hear it or fancy it perhaps in one of the Ballades of Chopin, with its entrancing harmonies, its varied and delicate ornamentation, its under-tone of passion and sadness, its storms and gusts of wind-like lashing notes, and the piercing shiver that thrills through its suave sunshine.

It is hardly needful, I hope, to say anything in praise of the last of the *Dramatic Lyrics*, the incomparable child's story of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*,* "a thing of joy for ever," as it has been well said, "to all with the child's heart, young and old." This poem—probably the most popular piece of any living author—was written for William Macready, the son of the actor, and was thrown into the volume at the last moment, for the sole purpose of filling up the sheet,

8. THE RETURN OF THE DRUSES. A Tragedy in Five Acts.

[Published in 1843 as No. IV. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. III., pp. 229—305). Written in 1840 (in five days), and named in MS. *Mansoor the Hierophant*. The action takes place during one day.]

The story of *The Return of the Druses* is purely imaginary as to facts, but it is founded on the Druse belief in divine

* Mr. Browning's authority for the story—which is told in many quarters—was North Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World*, 1678, and the books there cited.

incarnations, a belief inculcated by the founder of their religion, Hakeem Biamr Allah, the sixth Fatemite Caliph of Egypt, whose pretension to be an incarnation of the Divinity was stamped in the popular mind by his mysterious disappearance, and the expectation of his glorious return. Mr. Browning here gives the rein to his fervid and passionate imagination ; in event, in character, in expression, the play is romantic and lyrical, Oriental and ideal, painted with all the warm and gorgeous colouring of the East. The very first line—

“The moon is carried off in purple fire,—”

sounds the note of the new music ; and to the very last line the emotion is sustained at the same height. Superbly passionate, rapid, vivid, intense and picturesque, no stronger contrast could be imagined than that which exists between this drama and *King Victor and King Charles*. The cause of the difference must be sought in the different nature of the two subjects, for one of Mr. Browning's most eminent qualities is his care in harmonising treatment with subject. *King Victor and King Charles* is a modern play, dealing with human nature under all the restrictions of a pervading conventionality and an oppressive statecraft. It deals, moreover, with complex and weakened emotions, with the petty and prosaic details of a secondary Western government. *The Return of the Druses*, on the other hand, treats of human nature in its most romantic conditions, of the mystic East, of great and immediate issues—of the most inspiring of crises, a revolt for liberty, and a revolt under the leadership of a “Messiah,” about whom hangs a mystery, and a reputation of more than mortal power. The characters, like the language, are all somewhat idealised. Djabal, the protagonist, is the first instance (first, unless we so rate Paracelsus, which I should be loth to do) of a character specially fascinating, as an artistic subject, to Mr. Browning—the

deceiver of others or of himself who is only partially insincere, and not altogether ill-intentioned. Djabal is an impostor almost wholly for the sake of others. He is a patriotic Druse, the son of the last Emir, supposed to have perished in the massacre of the Sheikhs, but preserved when a child and educated in Europe. His sole aim is to free his nation from its bondage, and lead it back to Lebanon. But in order to strengthen the people's trust in him, and to lead them back in greater glory, he pretends that he is "Hakeem," their divine, predestined deliverer. The delusion grows upon himself; he succeeds triumphantly, but in the very moment of triumph he loses faith in himself, the imposture is all but discovered, and he dies, a victim of what was wrong in him, while the salt of his noble and successful purpose keeps alive his memory among his people. In striking contrast with Djabal stands Loys, the frank, bright, young Breton knight, with his quick, generous heart, his chivalrous straightforwardness of thought and action, his earnest pity for the oppressed Druses, and his passionate love for the Druse maiden Anael. Anael herself is truly a masterpiece—one of the most "actual yet uncommon" of the poet's women. She is a true daughter of the East, to the finest fibre of her being. Her tender and fiery soul burns upward through error and crime with a leaping, quenchless flame. She loves Djabal, believing him to be "Hakeem" and divine, with a love which seems to her too human, too much the love evoked by a mere man's nature. Her attempt at adoration only makes him feel the more keenly the fact of his imposture. Misunderstanding his agitation and the broken words he lets drop, she fancies he despises her, and feels impelled to do some great deed, and so exalt herself to be worthy of him. Fired with enthusiasm, she anticipates his crowning act, the act of liberation, and herself slays the tyrannical Prefect. The magnificent scene in which this occurs is the finest in the play, and there is a singularly impressive touch

of poetry and stagecraft in a certain line of it, where Djabal and Anael meet, at the moment when she has done the deed which he is waiting to do. Unconscious of what she has done, he tells her to go:—

“ I slay him here,
And here you ruin all. Why speak you not?
Anael, the Prefect comes !” [ANÆL screams.]

This mere stage-direction is a really great dramatic stroke. With this involuntary scream (and the shudder and start aside one imagines, to see if the dead man really is coming) a great actress might thrill an audience. Djabal, horror-stricken at what she has done, confesses to her that he is no Hakeem, but a mere man. After the first revulsion of feeling, her love, hitherto questioned and hampered by her would-be adoration, bursts forth with a fuller flood. But she expects him to confess to the tribe. Djabal refuses: he will carry through his scheme to the end. In the first flush of her indignation at his unworthiness, she denounces him. In the final scene occurs another wonderful touch of nature—a touch which reminds one of Desdemona’s “ Nobody: I myself,” in its divine and adorable self-sacrifice of truth. Learning what Anael has done, Djabal is about to confess his imposture to the people, who are still under his fascination, when Anael, all her old love—not her old belief—returning upon her, cries with her last breath, “ HAKEEM !” and dies upon the word. The Druses grovel before him ; as he still hesitates, the trumpet of his Venetian allies sounds. Turning to Khalil, Anael’s brother, he bids him take his place and lead the people home, accompanied and guarded by Loys. “ We follow !” cry the Druses, “ now exalt thyself !”

“ *Dja.* [*bends over ANÆL.*] And last to thee !
Ah, did I dream I was to have, this day,
Exalted thee ? A vain dream—hast thou not
Won greater exaltation ? What remains

But press to thee, exalt myself to thee ?

Thus I exalt myself, set free my soul !"

[*He stabs himself ; as he falls, supported by KHALIL and LOYS, the Venetians enter : the ADMIRAL advances.*

Admiral. God and St. Mark for Venice ! Plant the Lion !

[*At the clash of the planted standard, the Druses shout, and move tumultuously forward, LOYS drawing his sword.*

Dja. [*leading them a few steps between KHALIL and LOYS.*]

On to the Mountain ! At the Mountain, Druses ! [*Dies.*]

This superb last scene shows how well Mr. Browning is able, when he likes, to render the tumultuous action of a clashing crowd of persons and interests. The whole fourth and fifth acts are specially fine ; every word comes from the heart, every line is pregnant with emotion.

9. A BLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON. A Tragedy in Three Acts.

[Published in 1843 as No. V. of *Bells and Pomegranates* ; written in five days (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. IV., pp. 1—60). Played originally at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, February 11, 1843 (*Mildred*, Miss Helen Faucit ; *Lord Tresham*, Mr. Phelps). Revived by Mr. Phelps at Sadler's Wells, November 27, 1848 ; played at Boston, U.S., March 16, 1885, under the management of Mr. Lawrence Barrett, who took the part of *Lord Tresham* ; and at St. George's Hall, London, May 2, 1885, under the auspices of the Browning Society. The action takes place during two days.]

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon is the simplest, and perhaps the deepest and finest, of Mr. Browning's plays. The Browning Society's performance, and Mr. Barrett's in America, have proved its acting capacities, its power to hold and thrill an audience. The language has a rich simplicity of the highest dramatic value, quick with passion, pregnant with thought, and masterly in imagination ; the plot and characters are perhaps more interesting and affecting than in any other of the plays ; while the effect of the whole is impres-

sive from its unity. The scene is English ; the time, somewhere in the eighteenth century ; the motive, family honour and dishonour. The story appeals to ready popular emotions, emotions which, though lying nearest the surface, are also the most deeply-rooted. The whole action is passionately pathetic, and it is infused with a twofold tragedy,—the tragedy of the sin, and that of the misunderstanding—the last and final tragedy, which hangs on a word, a word spoken when only too late to save three lives. This irony of circumstance is at once the source of earth's saddest discords, and the motive of art's truest tragedies. It takes the place, in our modern world, of that Necessity, the irresistible Fate of the Greeks ; and is not less impressive because it arises from the impulse and unreasoning wilfulness of man rather than from the implacable insistency of God. It is with perfect justice, both moral and artistic, that the fatal crisis, though mediately the result of accident, of error, is shown to be the consequence and the punishment of wrong. A tragedy resulting from the mistakes of the wholly innocent would jar on our sense of right, and could never produce a legitimate work of art. Even *Œdipus* suffers, not merely because he is under the curse of a higher power, but because he is wilful, and rushes upon his own fate. *Timon* suffers, not because he was generous and good, but from the defects of his qualities. So, in this play, each of the characters calls down upon his own head the suffering which at first seems to be a mere caprice and confusion of chance. *Mildred Tresham* and *Henry Mertoun*, both very young, ignorant and unguarded, have sinned. They attempt a late reparation, apparently with success, but the hasty suspicion of *Lord Tresham*, *Mildred's* brother, diverted indeed into a wrong channel, brings down on both a terrible retribution. *Tresham*, who shares the ruin he causes, feels, too, that his punishment is his due. He has acted without pausing to consider, and he is called

on to pay the penalty of "evil wrought by want of thought."

The character of Mildred, "more sinned against than sinning," is exquisitely and most tenderly drawn. We see her, and we see and feel—

"the good and tender heart,
Its girl's trust and its woman's constancy,
How pure yet passionate, how calm yet kind,
How grave yet joyous, how reserved yet free
As light where friends are"—

as her brother, in a memorable passage, describes her. She is so thrillingly alive, so beautiful and individual, so pathetic and pitiful in her desolation. Every word she speaks comes straight from her heart to ours. "I know nothing that is so affecting," wrote Dickens in a letter to Forster, "nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young—I had no mother.'"^{*} Not till Pompilia do we find so pathetic a portrait of a woman.

In Thorold, Earl Tresham, we have an admirable picture of the head of a great house, proud above all things of the honour of the family and its yet stainless 'scutcheon, and proud, with a deep brotherly tenderness of his sister Mildred: a strong and fine nature, one whom men instinctively cite as "the perfect spirit of honour." Mertoun, the apparent hero of the play, is a much less prominent and masterly figure than Tresham, not so much from any lack of skill in his delineation, as from the essential ineffectualness of his nature. Guendolen Tresham, the Beatrice of the play—her lover Austin is certainly no Benedick—is one of the most pleasantly humorous characters in Mr. Browning's works. Her gay, light-hearted talk brightens the sombre action like a gleam of sunlight. And

^{*} Forster's *Life of Dickens*, vol. ii., p. 24.

like her prototype, she has a true woman's heart. As Beatrice stands by the calumniated Hero, so Guendolen stands by Mildred, and by her quick woman's heart and wit, her instinct of things, sees and seizes the missing clue, though too late, as it proves, to avert the impending catastrophe.

The play contains one of Mr. Browning's most delicate and musical lyrics—the serenade beginning, “There's a woman like a dew-drop.” This is the first of the love-songs in long lines which Mr. Browning has so frequently written of very recent years, and so seldom before.

10. COLOMBE'S BIRTHDAY. A Play in Five Acts.

[Published in 1844 as No VI. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. IV., pp. 61—143). Played at the Haymarket Theatre, April 25, 1853, Miss Helen Faucit taking the part of *Colombe*; also, with Miss Alma Murray as *Colombe*, at St. George's Hall, November 19, 1885, under the auspices of the Browning Society. The action takes place from morning to night of one day].

Colombe's Birthday, a drama founded on an imaginary episode in the history of a German duchy of the seventeenth century, is the first play which is mainly concerned with inward rather than outward action; in which the characters themselves, what they are in their own souls, what they think of themselves, and what others think of them, constitute the chief interest, the interest of the characters as they influence one another or external events being, however intense in itself, distinctly secondary. The point on which the action turns is this. Colombe of Ravestein, Duchess of Juliers and Cleves, is surprised, on the first anniversary of her accession (the day being also her birthday), by a rival claimant to the duchy, Prince Berthold, who proves to be in fact the true heir. Berthold, instead of pressing his claim, offers to marry

her. But he conceives the honour and the favour to be sufficient, and makes no pretence at offering love as well. On the other hand, Valence, a poor advocate of Cleves, who has stood by Colombe when all her other friends failed, offers her his love, a love to which she can only respond by "giving up the world"—in other words, by relinquishing her duchy, and the alliance with a Prince who is on the road to be Emperor. Now, we have nothing to do with the question of who has the right and who has the might: that matter is settled, and the succession agreed on, almost from the beginning. Nor are we made to feel that any disgrace or reputation of weakness will rest on Colombe if she gives up her place; not even that the pang at doing so will be over-acute or entirely unrelieved. All the interest centres in the purely personal and psychological bearings of the act. It is perhaps a consequence of this that the style is somewhat different from that of any previous play. Any one who notices the stage directions will see that the persons of the drama frequently speak "after a pause." The language which they use is, naturally enough, more deliberate and reflective, the lines are slower and more weighty, than would be appropriate amid the breathless action of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* or *The Return of the Druses*. A certain fiery quality, a thrilling, heart-stirred and heart-stirring tone, which we find in these is wanting; but the calm sweep of the action carries with it some of the finest harmonies of line and metaphor since *Paracelsus*.

Colombe, the veritable heroine of the drama, is, if not "the completest full-length portrait of a woman that Mr. Browning has drawn," certainly both one of the sweetest and one of the completest. Her character develops during the course of the play—as she herself says,

"This is indeed my birthday—soul and body,
Its hours have done on me the work of years—"

and it leaves her a nobler and stronger, yet not less charming woman than it found her. Hitherto she has been a mere "play-queen," shut in from action, shut in from facts and the world, and required only to be gay and amused. But now, at the first and yet final trial, she is proved and found to be of noble metal. The gay girlishness of the young Duchess, her joyous and generous light heart; her womanliness, her earnestness, her clear, deep, noble nature, attract us from her first words, and leave us, after the hour we have spent in her presence, with the inalienable uplifting memory that we have of some women whom we meet, for an hour or a moment, in the world or in books.

Berthold, the weary and unsatisfied conqueror, is a singularly unconventional figure. He is a man of action, with some of the sympathies of the scholar and the lover; resolute in the attainment of ends which he sees to be, in themselves, vulgar; his ambition rather an instinct than something to be pursued for itself, and his soul too keenly aware of the joys and interests he foregoes, to be quite satisfied or content with his lot and conduct. The grave courtesy of his speech to Colombe, his somewhat condescending but not unfriendly tone with Valence, his rough home-truths with the parasitical courtiers, and his frank confidence with Melchior, are admirably discriminated. Melchior himself, little as he speaks, is a fine sketch of the contemplative, bookish man who finds no more congenial companion and study than a successful man of action. His attitude of detachment—a mere spectator in the background—is well in keeping with the calm and thoughtful character of the play. Valence, the true hero of the piece, the "pale fiery man" who can speak with so moving an eloquence, whether he is pleading the wrongs of his townsmen or of Colombe, the rights of Berthold or himself, is no less masterly a portrait than the Prince, though perhaps less wholly unconventional a character. His grave earnestness,

his honour as a man and passion as a lover, move our instinctive sympathy, and he never for a moment forfeits it. Were it for nothing else, he would win our lasting remembrance from the mere fact that he is one of the speakers in that most delightful of love-duets, the incomparable scene at the close of the fourth act. "I remember well to have seen," wrote Mr. Moncure D. Conway in 1854, "a vast miscellaneous crowd in an American theatre hanging with breathless attention upon every word of this interview, down to the splendid climax when, in obedience to the Duchess's direction to Valence how he should reveal his love to the lady she so little suspects herself to be herself, he kneels—every heart evidently feeling each word as an electric touch, and all giving vent at last to their emotion in round after round of hearty applause."

All the minor characters are very good and life-like, particularly Guibert, the shrewd, hesitating, talkative, cynical, really good-hearted old courtier, whom not even a court has deprived of a heart, though the dangerous influence of the conscienceless Gaucelme, his fellow, has in its time played sad pranks with it. He is one of the best of Mr. Browning's minor characters.

The performance, in 1885, of *Colombe's Birthday*, under the auspices of the Browning Society, has brought to light unsuspected acting qualities in what is certainly not the most "dramatic" of Mr. Browning's plays. "*Colombe's Birthday*," it was said on the occasion, "is charming on the boards, clearer, more direct in action, more full of delicate surprises than one imagines it in print. With a very little cutting it could be made an excellent acting play."*

* A. Mary F. Robinson, in *Boston Literary World*, December 12, 1885.

II. DRAMATIC ROMANCES AND LYRICS.

[Published in 1845 as No. VII. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, dispersedly, in Vols. III., IV., and V.).]

Dramatic Romances, Mr. Browning's second volume of miscellaneous poems, is not markedly different in style or substance from the *Lyrics* published three years earlier. It is somewhat more mature, no doubt, as a whole, somewhat richer and fuller, somewhat wider in reach and firmer in grasp; but in tone and treatment it harmonises considerably more with its predecessor than with its successor, after so long an interval, *Men and Women*. The book opens with the admirable and ever popular ballad, *How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*—the most popular piece, except perhaps the *Pied Piper*, that Mr. Browning has written. Few boys, I suppose, have not read with breathless emotion this most stirring of ballads: few men can read it without a thrill. The "good news" is intended for that of the Pacification of Ghent, but the incident itself is not historical. The poem was written at sea, off the African coast. Another poem of somewhat similar kind, appealing more directly than usual to the simpler feelings, is *The Lost Leader*. It was originally written in reference to Wordsworth's abandonment of the Liberal cause, with perhaps a thought of Southey, but it is applicable to any popular apostacy. This is one of those songs that do the work of swords. It shows how easily Mr. Browning, had he so chosen, could have stirred the national feeling with his lyrics. The *Home-Thoughts from Abroad* belongs, in its simple directness, its personal and forthright fervour of song, to this section of the work. With the two pieces now known as *Home-Thoughts from Abroad* and *Home-Thoughts from the Sea*, a third, very inferior, piece was originally published. It is now more

appropriately included with *Claret* and *Tokay* (two capital little snatches) under the head of *Nationality in Drinks*. The two "Home-thoughts," from sea and from land, are equally remarkable for their poetry and their patriotism. I hope there is no need to commend to all true Englishmen so passionate and heartfelt a record of love for England. *Home-Thoughts from the Sea* is of that order of song that moves the heart "more than with a trumpet."

"Nobly, nobly, Cape Saint Vincent to the North-West died away;
 Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;
 Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
 In the dimmest North-East distance dawned Gibraltar grand and gray;
 'Here and here did England help me: how can I help England?'—say,
 Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and pray,
 While Jove's planet rises yonder, silent over Africa

Only in silence can such verse as that be praised. *Home-Thoughts from Abroad*, a beautiful poem, contains the magical and oft-quoted lines on the thrush:—

"That's the wise thrush: he sings each song twice over,
 Lest you should think he never could recapture
 The first fine careless rapture!"

Next to *The Lost Leader* comes, in the original edition, a sort of companion poem, in

"THE LOST MISTRESS.

I.

"All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
 As one at first believes?
 Hark! 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
 About your cottage eaves!"

II.

"And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
 I noticed that, to-day;
 One day more bursts them open fully
 —You know the red turns gray.

III.

"To-morrow we meet the same, then, dearest?
 May I take your hand in mine?
 Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest
 Keep much that I resign:

IV.

"For each glance of the eye so bright and black,
 Though I keep with heart's endeavour,—
 Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,
 Though it stay in my heart for ever!—

"Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
 Or only a thought stronger;
 I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
 Or so very little longer!"

This is one of those love-lyrics which we cannot but consider among the noblest of such songs in all Love's language. The theme of unrequited love has probably produced more effusions of sickly sentiment than any other single subject. But Mr. Browning, who has employed the motive in a number of his lyrics—here, for instance, and yet more notably in *The Last Ride Together*—treats the subject in a way that is at once novel and admirable. There is no talk, among his lovers, of "blighted hearts," no whining and puling, no contemptible professions of contempt for the woman who has had the ill-taste to refuse some wondrous-conceited lover, but a noble manly resignation, a profound and still grateful sorrow which has no touch in it of reproach, no tone of disloyalty, and no pretence of despair. Such a spirit as this is surely a very uncommon and a very excellent one. In the first of the *Garden Fancies* (*The Flower's Name*), a delicate little love-story of a happier kind is hinted at. The second *Garden Fancy* (*Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis*) is of very different tone. It is a whimsical tale of a no less whimsical revenge taken upon a piece of

pedantic lumber, the name of which is given in the title, The varying ring and swing communicated to the dactyls of these two pieces by the jolly humour of the one and the refined sentiment of the other, is a point worth noticing. The easy flow, the careless charm of their versification, is by no means the artless matter it may seem to a careless reader. Nor is it the easiest of metrical tasks to poise perfectly the loose lilt of such verses as these :—

“ What a name ! Was it love or praise ?
 Speech half-asleep or song half-awake ?
 I must learn Spanish, one of these days,
 Only for that slow sweet name’s sake.”

The two perfect little pieces on “ Fame ” and “ Love ”—*Earth’s Immortalities*—are remarkable, even in Mr. Browning’s work, for their concentrated felicity, and, the second especially, for swift suggestiveness of haunting music. Not less exquisite in its subtle simplicity and fresh melody is the following *Song* :—

1.

“ Nay but you, who do not love her.
 Is she not pure gold, my mistress ?
 Holds earth aught—speak truth—above her ?
 Aught like this tress, see, and this tress,
 And this last fairest tress of all,
 So fair, see, ere I let it fall ?

“ Because, you spend your lives in praising ;
 To praise, you search the wide world over :
 Then why not witness, calmly gazing,
 If earth holds aught—speak truth—above her ?
 Above this tress, and this, I touch
 But cannot praise, I love so much ! ”

Finer still, in their own way, are the two strong and suggestive little pictures, *Night and Morning*—each, in twelve or in four lines, a whole life-history.

I.

" MEETING AT NIGHT.

I.

' The gray sea and the long black land ;
 And the yellow half-moon large and low ;
 And the startled little waves that leap
 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

" Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach ;
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears ;
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
 And blue spurt of a lighted match,
 And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
 Than the two hearts beating each to each ! "

II.

" PARTING AT MORNING.

" Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,
 And the sun looked over the mountain's rim ;
 And straight was a path of gold for him,
 And the need of a world of men for me."

But the very greatest work in the volume is not found in these purely lyrical pieces ; it must be sought for in the more elaborate dramatic monologues. *Pictor Ignotus* (Florence, 15—) is the first of the great " painting-poems " into which Mr. Browning has put so much of his finest art. It is a sort of first faint hint or foreshadowing of *Andrea del Sarto*, perfectly individual and distinct though it is. *Pictor Ignotus* expresses the subdued sadness of a too timid or too sensitive nature—an " unknown painter " who has dreamed of painting great pictures and winning great fame, but who shrinks equally from the attempt and the reward : an attempt which he is too self-distrustful to make, a reward which he is too painfully discriminating to enjoy.

"So, die my pictures ! surely, gently die !
 O youth, men praise so,—holds their praise its worth ?
 Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry ?
 Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth ?"

The monotonous "linked sweetness long drawn out" of the verses, the admirably arranged pause, recurrence and relapse of the lines, render the sense and substance of the subject with singular appropriateness. *The Tomb at St. Praxed's* (now known as *The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church*) is best described in the well-known words of Mr. Ruskin :—

"Robert Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages ; always vital, right, and profound ; so that in the matter of art, with which we have been specially concerned, there is hardly a principle connected with the mediæval temper that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged lines of his" [70 lines quoted, from "As here I lie" to "Tully, my master? Ulpian serves his need."]. "I know no other piece of modern English prose or poetry in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I have said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the 'Stones of Venice,' put into as many lines, Browning's also being the antecedent work."*

This poem is the third of the iambic monologues, and the *first* (excluding *Artemis Prologuizes*) in blank verse. I am not aware if it was written much later than *Pictor Ignotus*, but there can be no comparison of the two for a moment. Scarcely at his very best—scarcely in the very greatest monologues of the central series of *Men and Women*, or in these only—has Mr. Browning exceeded this poem. As a study in human nature it has all the concentrated truth, all the biting and imaginative realism, of a scene from Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* : it is as much a fact and a creation. It is, moreover, as Mr. Ruskin has told us,

* *Modern Painters*, Vol. IV. pp. 377-79

typical not only of a single individual but of a whole epoch ; while, as a piece of metrical writing, it has all the originality of an innovation. If Mr. Browning can scarcely be said to have created this species of blank verse—half familiar, vivid with natural life, full of vigour and beauty, rising and falling, with the unerring motion of the sea, from depth to height, from height to depth, now level and smooth and shining, now rough with thickening foam, blown by the winds of passion and lulled with the falling breeze—if he has not exactly created it, he has certainly adapted, perfected, and made it a new thing in his hands.

Akin to *The Tomb at St. Praxed's* on its dramatic, though dissimilar on its lyric, side, is the picturesque and terrible little poem of *The Laboratory*,* in which a Brinvilliers of the *Ancien Régime* is represented buying poison for her rival ; one of the very finest examples of Mr. Browning's unique power of compressing and concentrating intense emotion into a few pregnant words, words that move our souls to a perfect passion of terror and pity and sympathy. Here is a verse, as accentuated, for reading, by Mr. William Allingham in the note to the poem in his *Nightingale Valley* :—

“ *He is with her,—and they know that I know
Where they are, what they do : they believe my tears flow
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in for them !—I am here.* ”

This tells its own story. It is in such poems that Mr. Browning is at his very best, nor is he perhaps anywhere so inimitable : one would at least have said so before *Rizpah* took the world by surprise. The second poem under the general heading of “ France and Spain,” *The Confessional*—in which a girl, half-maddened by remorse and impotent

* It is interesting to remember that Rossetti's first water-colour was an illustration of this poem, and has for subject and title the line, “ Which is the poison to poison her, prithee ? ”

rage, tells how a false priest induced her to betray the political secrets of her lover,—is, though vivid and effective, not nearly so powerful and penetrating as its companion piece. *Time's Revenges* may perhaps be classified with these utterances of individual passion, though in form it is more closely connected with the poems I shall touch on next. It is a bitter and affecting little poem, not unlike some of the pieces penned many years afterwards by a remarkable and unfortunate poet who knew, in his own experience, something of what Mr. Browning happily rendered by the instinct of the dramatist only. It is a powerful and absolutely realistic rendering of a certain sordid and tragic aspect of life, and is infused with that peculiar grim humour—the laugh that chokes in a sob—which comes to men when mere lamentation is a thing foregone.

The octosyllabic couplets of *Time's Revenges*, as well as its similarly realistic treatment and striking simplicity of verse and phrase, connect it with the admirable little poem now known as *The Italian in England*.* This is a tale of an Italian patriot, who, after an unsuccessful rising, has taken refuge in England. It tells of his escape and of how he was saved from the Austrian pursuers by the tact and fidelity of a young peasant woman. Its chief charm lies in the simplicity and sincere directness of its telling. *The Englishman in Italy*, a poem of very different class, written in brisk and vigorous anapæsts, is a vivid and humorous picture of Italian country life, the most entirely *descriptive* poem ever written by Mr. Browning. It is delightfully gay and charming and picturesque, and is an excellent example of how literal and lengthy in description Mr. Browning can be, little as he affects the descriptive style in and for itself. In

* "Mr. Browning is proud to remember," we are told by Mrs. Orr, "that Mazzini informed him he had read this poem to certain of his fellow exiles in England to show how an Englishman could sympathise with them."—*Handbook*, 2nd ed., p. 306.

The Glove we have a new version, from a quite original and thoroughly characteristic standpoint, of the familiar old story known to all in its metrical version by Leigh Hunt, and more curtly rhymed (without any very great impressiveness) by Schiller. Mr. Browning has shown elsewhere that he can tell a simple anecdote simply, but he has here seized upon the tale of the glove, not for the purpose of telling over again what Leigh Hunt had so charmingly and sufficiently told, but in order to present the old story in a new light—to show how the lady might have been right and the knight wrong, in spite of King Francis's verdict and the look of things. The tale, which is very wittily told, and contains some magnificent lines on the lion, is supposed to be related by Peter Ronsard, in the position of onlooker and moraliser; and the character of the narrator, after the poet's manner, is brought out by many cunning little touches. The poem is written almost throughout in double rhymes, in the metre and much in the manner of the *Pacchiarotto* of thirty years later. It is worth noticing that in the lines spoken by the lady to Ronsard, and in these alone, the double rhymes are replaced by single ones, thus making a distinct severance between the earnestness of this one passage and the cynical wit of the rest.

The easy mastery of difficult rhyming which we notice in this piece is still more marked in the strange and beautiful romance named *The Flight of the Duchess*.* Not even in

* Some curious particulars are recorded in reference to the composition of this poem. "*The Flight of the Duchess* took its rise from a line—'Following the Queen of the Gipsies, O!' the burden of a song which the poet, when a boy, heard a woman singing on a Guy Fawkes' day. The poem was written in two parts, of which the first was published in *Hood's Magazine*, April, 1845, and contained only nine sections. As Mr. Browning was writing it, he was interrupted by the arrival of a friend on some important business, which drove all thoughts of the Duchess and the scheme of her story out of the poet's head. But some months after the publication of the first part, when he was staying at Bettisfield Park, in Shropshire, a guest, speaking of early winter, said, 'The deer had already to break the ice in the pond.' On this a fancy struck the poet, and, on returning home, he

Pacchiarotto has Mr. Browning so revelled in the most outlandish and seemingly incredible combinations of sound—double and treble rhymes of equal audacity and success. There is much dramatic appropriateness in the unconventional diction, the story being put into the mouth of a rough old huntsman. The device of linking fantasy with familiarity is very curious, and the effect is original in the extreme. The poem is a fusion of many elements, and has all the varying colour of a romantic comedy. Contrast the intensely picturesque opening landscape, the cleverly minute description of the gipsies and their trades, the humorous naturalness of the Duke's mediæval masquerading as related by his unsympathising forester, and, in a higher key, the beautiful figure of the young Duchess, and the serene mystical splendour of the old gipsy's chant.

Two poems yet remain to be named, and two of the most perfect in the book. The little parable poem of *The Boy and the Angel* is one of the most simply beautiful, yet deeply earnest, of Mr. Browning's lyrical poems. It is a parable in which "the allegorical intent seems to be shed by the story, like a natural perfume from a flower;" and it preaches a sermon on contentment and the doing of God's will such as no theologian could better. *Saul* (which I shall mention here, though only the first part, sections one to nine, appeared in *Dramatic Romances*, sections ten to nineteen being first published in *Men and Women*) has been by some considered almost or quite the very finest single poem of Mr. Browning's. And indeed it seems to unite almost every poetic gift in consummate and perfect fusion. Music, song, the beauty of nature, the joy of life, the glory and greatness of man, the might of Love, human and divine: all these are set to an orchestral accompaniment of magnificent continuous harmony, now hushed as the

worked it up into the conclusion of *The Flight of the Duchess* as it now stands."—*Academy*, May 5, 1883.

wind among the woods at evening, now strong and sonorous as the storm-wind battling with the mountain-pine. *Saul* is a vision of life, of time and eternity, told in song as sublime as the vision is steadfast. The choral symphony of earth and all her voices with which the poem concludes is at once the easiest passage to separate from its context, and (if we may dare, in such a matter, to choose) one, at least, of the very greatest of all

"I know not too well how I found my way home in the night.
There were witnesses, cohorts about me, to left and to right,
Angels, powers, the unuttered, unseen, the alive, the aware :
I repressed, I got through them as hardly, as strugglingly there,
As a runner beset by the populace famished for news—
Life or death. The whole earth was awakened, hell loosed with her
crews ;

And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled and shot
Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge : but I fainted not,
For the Hand still impelled me at once and supported, suppressed
All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet, and holy behest,
Till the rapture was shut in itself, and the earth sank to rest.
Anon at the dawn, all that trouble had withered from earth—
Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day's tender birth ;
In the gathered intensity brought to the gray of the hills ;
In the shuddering forests' held breath ; in the sudden wind-thrills ;
In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with eye sidling still
Though averted with wonder and dread ; in the birds stiff and chill
That rose heavily, as I approached them, made stupid with awe :
E'en the serpent that slid away silent,—he felt the new law.
The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the flowers ;
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved the vine-
bowers :

And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and low,
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—"E'en so, it is so !"

12. A SOUL'S TRAGEDY.

[Published in 1846 (with *Luria*) as No. VIII. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. V., pp. 1-41)].

The development of Mr. Browning's genius, as shown in

his plays, has been touched on in dealing with *Colombe's Birthday*. That play, as I intimated, shows the first token of transition from the comparatively conventional dramatic style of the early plays to the completely unconventional style of the later ones, which in turn lead almost imperceptibly to the final pausing-place of the monologue. From *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* to *Colombe's Birthday* is a step; from *Colombe's Birthday* to *A Soul's Tragedy* and *Luria* another step; and in these last we are not more than another step from *Men and Women* and its successors. In *A Soul's Tragedy* the action is all internalized. Outward action there is, and of a sufficiently picturesque nature; but here, considerably more than even in *Colombe's Birthday*, the interest is withdrawn from the action, as action, and concentrated on a single character, whose "*soul's* tragedy," not his mere worldly fortunes, strange and significant as these are, we are called on to contemplate. Chiappino fills and possesses the scene. The other characters are carefully subordinated, and the impression we receive is not unlike that received from one of Mr. Browning's most vivid and complete monologues, with its carefully placed apparatus of side-lights.

The character of Chiappino is that of a Djabal degenerated; he is the second of Mr. Browning's delineations of the half-deceived and half-deceiving nature, the moral hybrid. Chiappino comes before us as a much-professing yet apparently little-performing person, moody and complaining, envious of his friend Luitolfo's better fortune, a soured man and a discontented patriot. But he is quite sure of his own complete probity. He declaims bitterly against his fellow-townsmen, his friend, and his love—all of whom, he asseverates, treat him unjustly, and as he never could, by any possibility, treat them. While he is thus protesting to Eulalia, his friend's betrothed, to whom for the first time he avows his own love, a trial is at hand, and nearer than he or

we expect. Luitolfo rushes in. He has gone to the Provost's palace to intercede on behalf of his banished friend, and in a moment of wrath has struck and, as he thinks, killed the Provost: the guards are after him, and he is lost. Is this the moment of test? Apparently; and apparently Chiappino proves his nobility. For, with truly heroic unselfishness, he exchanges dress with his friend, induces him, in a sort of stupefaction of terror, to escape, and remains in his place, "to die for him." But the harder test has yet to come. Instead of the Provost's guards, it is the enthusiastic populace that burst in upon him, hailing him as saviour and liberator. The people have risen in revolt, the guards have fled, and the people call on the striker of the blow to be their leader. *Chiappino says nothing*. "Chiappino?" says Eulalia, questioning him with her eyes. "Yes, I understand," he rejoins,

"You think I should have promptly disowned
This deed with its strange unforeseen success,
In favour of Luitolfo. But the peril,
So far from ended, hardly seems begun.
To-morrow, rather, when a calm succeeds,
We easily shall make him full amends:
And meantime—if we save them as they pray,
And justify the deed by its effects?"

Eu. You would, for worlds, you had denied at once.

Ch. I know my own intention, be assured!

All's well. Precede us, fellow-citizens!"

Thus ends act first, "being what was called the poetry of Chiappino's life;" and act second, "its prose," opens after a supposed interval of a month.

The second act exhibits, in very humorous prose, the gradual and inevitable deterioration which the silence and the deception have brought about. Drawn on and on, upon his own lines of thought and conduct, by Ogniben, the Pope's legate, who has come to put down the revolt by

diplomatic measures, Chiappino denies his political principles—finding a democratic rule not at all so necessary when possibly the provostship may fall to himself; denies his love, for his views of love are, he finds, widened; and finally, denies his friend, to the extent of arguing that the very blow which, as struck by Luitolfo, has been the factor of his fortune, was practically, because logically, his own. Ogniben now agrees to invest him with the Provost's office, making at the same time the stipulation that the actual assailant of the Provost shall suffer the proper penalty. Hereupon Luitolfo comes forward and avows the deed. Ogniben orders him to his house; Chiappino "goes aside for a time;" "and now," concludes the legate, addressing the people, "give thanks to God, the keys of the Provost's palace to me, and yourselves to profitable meditation at home."

Besides Chiappino, there are three other characters, who serve to set off the main figure. Eulalia is an observer, Luitolfo a foil, Ogniben a touchstone. Eulalia and Luitolfo, though sufficiently wrought out for their several purposes, are but sketches, the latter perhaps more distinctly outlined than the former, and [serving admirably as a contrast to Chiappino. But Ogniben, who does so much of the talking in the second act, is a really memorable figure. His portrait is painted with more prominent effect, for his part in the play is to draw Chiappino out, and to confound him with his own weapons: "I help men," as he says, "to carry out their own principles; if they please to say two and two make five, I assent, so they will but go on and say, four and four make ten." His shrewd Socratic prose is delightfully wise and witty. This prose—the only dramatic prose written by Mr. Browning, with the exception of that in *Pippa Passes*—is, in its way, almost as good as the poetry: admirably keen, vivacious, full-thoughted, picturesque, and singularly original. For instance, Chiappino is expressing

his longing for a woman who could understand, as he says, the whole of him, to whom he could reveal alike his strength and weakness.

"Ah my friend," rejoins Ogniben, "wish for nothing so foolish ! Worship your love, give her the best of you to see ; be to her like the western lands (they bring us such strange news of) to the Spanish Court ; send her only your lumps of gold, fans of feathers, your spirit-like birds, and fruits and gems. So shall you, what is unseen of you, be supposed altogether a paradise by her,—as these western lands by Spain ; though I warrant there is filth, red baboons, ugly reptiles and squalor enough, which they bring Spain as few samples of as possible."

There is in all this prose, lengthy as it is, the true dramatic note, a recognisable tone of talk. But *A Soul's Tragedy* is for the study. not the stage.

13. LURIA. A Tragedy in Five Acts.

[Published in 1846 (with *A Soul's Tragedy*) as No. VIII. of *Bells and Pomegranates* (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. V., pp. 43—114). The action takes place from morning to night of one day].

The action and interest in *Luria* are somewhat less inter-nalised than in *A Soul's Tragedy*, but the drama is in form a still nearer approach to monologue. Many of the speeches are so long as to be almost monologues in themselves ; and the whole play is manifestly written—unlike every other play save its immediate predecessor, or rather its contemporary—with no thought of the stage. The poet is retreating farther and farther from the glare of the footlights ; he is writing after his own fancy, and not as his audience or his manager would wish him to write. None of Mr. Browning's plays is so full of large heroic speech, of deep philosophy, of choice illustration ; seldom has he written nobler poetry. There is not the intense and throbbing humanity of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* ; the characters are not so simply and so surely living men and women ; but in the grave and lofty speech

and idealised characters of *Luria* we have something new, and something great as well.

The central figure is *Luria* himself; but the other characters are not so carefully and completely subordinated to him as are those in *A Soul's Tragedy* to Chiappino. *Luria* is one of the noblest, most heroic figures in Mr. Browning's works. A Moor, with the instincts of the East and the culture of the West, he presents a racial problem which is very subtly handled; while his natural nobility and confidence are no less subtly set off against the Italian craft of his surroundings. The spectacle he presents is impressive and pathetic. An alien, with no bond to Florence save that of his inalienable love, he has led her forces against the Pisans, and saved her. Looking for no reward but the grateful love of the people he has saved, he meets instead with the basest ingratitude. While he is fighting and conquering for her, Florence, at home, is trying him for his life on a charge of treachery: a charge which has no foundation but in the base natures of his accusers, who know that he might, and therefore suspect that he will, turn to evil purpose his military successes and consequent popularity with the army. Generals of their own blood have betrayed them: how much more this barbarian? *Luria* learns of the treachery of his allies in time to take revenge—he is urged to revenge, and the means are placed in his hands, but his nobler nature conquers, and the punishment he deals on Florence is the punishment of his own voluntary death. The strength of love which restrains him from chastising the ungrateful city forbids him to live when his sole love has proved false, his sole link to life has gone. But before he dies he has the satisfaction of seeing the late repentance and regret of every enemy, whether secret schemer or open foe.

“*Luria* goes not poorly forth.

If we could wait! The only fault's with time;
All men become good creatures: but so slow!’

In the pathos of his life and death Luria may remind us of another unrequited lover, Strafford, whose devotion to his king gains the same reward as Luria's devotion to his adopted country.

In Luria's devoted friend and comrade Husain we have a contrasted picture of the Moor untouched by alien culture. The instincts of the one are dulled or disturbed by his Western wisdom and experience ; Husain still keeps the old instincts and the unmixed nature, and still speaks the fervid and highly-coloured Eastern speech. But while Husain is to some extent a contrast with Luria, Luria and Husain together form an infinitely stronger contrast with the group of Italians. Braccio, the Florentine Commissary, is an admirable study of Italian subtlety and craft. Only a writer with Mr. Browning's special knowledge and sympathies could have conceived and executed so acute and true a picture of the Italian temper of the time—a temper manifested with singular appropriateness by the city of Machiavelli. Braccio is the chief schemer against Luria, and he schemes, not from any real ill-will, but from the diplomatic distrust of a too cautious and too suspicious patriot. Domizia, the vengeful Florentine lady, plotting against Florence with the tireless patience of an unforgetting wrong, is also a representative sketch, though not so clearly and firmly outlined as a character. Puccio, Luria's chief officer, once his commander—the simple fighting soldier, discontented but honest, unswervingly loyal to Florence, but little by little aware of and aggrieved at the wrong done to Luria,—is a really touching conception. Tiburzio, the Pisan leader, is yet finer in his perfect chivalry of service to his foe. Nothing could be more nobly planned than the first meeting, and indeed the whole relations, of these magnanimous and worthy opponents, Luria and Tiburzio. There is a certain intellectual fascination for Mr. Browning in the analysis of mean natures and dubious motives, but of no

contemporary can it be more justly said that he rises ever and easily to the height and at the touch of an heroic action or a noble nature.

14. CHRISTMAS-EVE AND EASTER-DAY. A Poëm.

[Published in 1850 (*Poetical Works*, 1868; Vol. V., pp. 115—204). Written in Florence.]

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is the chief work of Mr. Browning which deals directly and primarily with the subject of Christianity and the religious beliefs of the age. Both the poems which appear under this title are studies of religious life and thought, the first more in the narrative and critical way, the second rather in relation to individual experience. Mr. Browning's position towards Christianity is perhaps unique. He has been described as "the latest extant Defender of the Faith," but the manner of his belief and the modes of his defence are as little conventional as any other of his qualities. Beyond all question the most deeply religious poet of our day, perhaps the greatest religious poet we have ever had, Mr. Browning has never written anything in the ordinary style of religious verse—the style of Herbert, of Keble, of the hymn-writers. The spirit which runs through all his work is more often felt as an influence than manifested in any concrete and separate form. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, *La Saisiaz* and *Ferishtah's Fancies* are the only prominent exceptions to this rule.

Christmas-Eve is a study or vision of the religious life of the time. It purports to be the narrative of a strange experience lived through on a Christmas-Eve—"whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body,"—in a little dissenting chapel on the outskirts of a country town, in St. Peter's at Rome, and at an agnostic lecture-hall in Göttingen. The vivid humorous sketch of the little chapel and its flock is like a bit of Dickens at his best. Equally

good, in another kind, is the picture of the Professor and his audience at Göttingen, with its searching and scathing irony of merciless logic, and the tender and subtle discrimination of its judgment, sympathetic with the good faith of the honest thinker. Different again in style, and higher still in poetry, is the glowing description of the Basilica and its sensuous fervour of ceremonial; and higher and greater yet the picture of the double lunar rainbow merging into that of the vision,—a piece of imaginative work never perhaps exceeded in spiritual exaltation and concordant splendour of song in the whole works of the poet, though quite equalled, if not exceeded, by the more terrible vision of judgment which will be cited later from *Easter-Day*.

“ For lo, what think you ? suddenly
The rain and the wind ceased, and the sky
Received at once the full fruition
Of the moon’s consummate apparition.
The black cloud-barricade was riven,
Ruined beneath her feet, and driven
Deep in the West ; while, bare and breathless,
North and South and East lay ready
For a glorious thing that, dauntless, deathless,
Sprang across them and stood steady.
’Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect,
From heaven to heaven extending, perfect
As the mother-moon’s self, full in face.
It rose, distinctly at the base
With its seven proper colours chorded,
Which still, in the rising, were compressed,
Until at last they coalesced,
And supreme the spectral creature lorded
In a triumph of purest white,—
Above which intervened the night.
But above night too, like only the next,
The second of a wondrous sequence,
Reaching in rare and rarer frequency,
Till the heaven of heavens were circumflexed,
Another rainbow rose, a mightier,
Fainter, flushier and flightier,—

Rapture dying along its verge.
Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge,
Whose, from the straining topmost dark,
On to the keystone of that arc?"

In such strains as this, all that there is in the poet of mere worldly wisdom and intellectual ingenuity drops off, or is rather consumed to a white glow in the intense flame of triumphant and over-mastering inspiration.

The piercing light cast in the poem on the representative creeds of the age is well worthy of serious consideration, from an ethical as well as from a poetical point of view. No nobler lesson of religious tolerance, united with religious earnestness, has been preached in our day. Nothing could be more novel and audacious than the union here attempted and achieved of colloquial realism and grotesque humour with imaginative vision and solemn earnestness. The style and metre vary with the mood. Where the narrative is serious the lines are regular and careful, they shrink to their smallest structural limit, and the rhymes are chiefly single and simple. Where it becomes humorous, the rhythm lengthens out its elastic syllables to the full extent, and swings and sways, jolts and rushes; the rhymes fall double and triple and break out into audible laughter.

Easter-Day, like its predecessor, is written in lines of four beats each, but the general effect is totally dissimilar. Here the verse is reduced to its barest constituents; every line is, syllabically as well as accentually, of equal length; and the lines run in pairs, without one double rhyme throughout. The tone and contents of the two poems (though also, in a sense, derived from the same elements) are in similar contrast. *Easter-Day*, despite a momentary touch or glimmer, here and there, of grave humour, is thoroughly serious in manner and continuously solemn in subject. The burden of the poem is stated in its first two lines:—

"How very hard it is to be
A Christian!"

Up to the thirteenth section it is an argument between the speaker, who is possessed of much faith but has a distinct tendency to pessimism, and another, who has a sceptical but also a hopeful turn of mind, respecting Christianity, its credibility, and how its doctrines fit human nature and affect the conduct of life. After keen discussion the argument returns to the lament, common to both disputants—how very hard it is to be, practically, a Christian. The speaker then relates, on account of its bearing on the discussion, an experience (or vision, as he leaves us free to imagine) which once came to him. Three years before, on an Easter-Eve, he was crossing the common where stood the chapel referred to by their friend (the poem thus, and thus only, links on to *Christmas-Eve*). As he walked along, musingly, he asked himself what the Faith really was to him—what would be his fate, for instance, if he fell dead that moment? And he said to himself, jestingly enough, why should not the judgment-day dawn now, on Easter-morn?

“And as I said

This nonsense, throwing back my head
With light complacent laugh, I found
Suddenly all the midnight round
One fire. The dome of heaven had stood
As made up of a multitude
Of handbreadth cloudlets, one vast rack
Of ripples infinite and black,
From sky to sky. Sudden there went,
Like horror and astonishment,
A fierce vindictive scribble of red
Quick flame across, as if one said
(The angry scribe of Judgment) ‘There—
‘Burn it!’ And straight I was aware
That the whole ribwork round, minute
Cloud touching cloud beyond compute,
Was tinted, each with its own spot
Of burning at the core, till clot
Jammed against clot, and spilt its fire
Over all heaven, which ‘gan suspire

As fanned to measure equable,—
 Just so great conflagrations kill
 Night overhead, and rise and sink,
 Reflected. Now the fire would shrink
 And wither off the blasted face
 Of heaven, and I distinct might trace
 The sharp black ridgy outlines left
 Unburned like network—then, each cleft
 The fire had been sucked back into,
 Regorged, and out it surging flew
 Furiously, and night writhed inflamed,
 Till, tolerating to be tamed
 No longer, certain rays world-wide
 Shot downwardly. On every side,
 Caught past escape, the earth was lit ;
 As if a dragon's nostril split
 And all his famished ire o'erflowed ;
 Then as he winced at his lord's goad,
 Back he inhaled : whereat I found
 The clouds into vast pillars bound,
 Based on the corners of the earth
 Propping the skies at top : a dearth
 Of fire i' the violet intervals,
 Leaving exposed the utmost walls
 Of time, about to tumble in
 And end the world."

Judgment, according to the vision, is now over. He who has chosen earth rather than heaven, is allowed his choice : earth is his for ever. How the walls of the world shrink and narrow, how the glow fades off from the beauty of nature, of art, of science ; how the judged soul prays for only a chance of love, only a hope of ultimate heaven ; how the ban is taken off him, and he wakes from the vision on the grey plain as Easter-morn is breaking : this, with its profound and convincing moral lessons, is told, without a didactic note, in poetry of sustained splendour,—from first to last a piece of imaginative work of the very highest order. In sheer height of imagination *Easter-Day* could scarcely exceed the greatest parts of *Christmas-Eve*, but it preserves

a level of more equable splendour, it is a work of art of more chastened workmanship. In its ethical aspect it is also of special importance, for, while the poet does not necessarily identify himself in all respects with the seer of the vision, the poem enshrines some of Mr. Browning's deepest convictions on life and religion.

15. MEN AND WOMEN.

[Published in 1854, in 2 vols. ; now dispersed in Vols. III., IV. and V. of *Poetical Works*, 1868.]

The series of *Men and Women*, fifty-one poems in number, represents Mr. Browning's genius at its ripe maturity, its highest uniform level. In this central work of his career, every element of his genius is equally developed, and the whole brought into a perfection of harmony never before or since attained. There is no lack, there is no excess. I do not say that the poet has not touched higher heights since, or perhaps before ; but that he has never since nor before maintained himself so long on so high a height, never exhibited the rounded perfection, the imagination, thought, passion, melody, variety, all fused in one, never produced a single work or group at once so great and so various, admits, I think, of little doubt. Here are fifty poems, every one of which, in its way, is a masterpiece ; and the range is such as no other English poet has perhaps ever covered in a single book of miscellaneous poems.

In *Men and Women* Mr. Browning's special instrument—the monologue—is brought to perfection. Such monologues as *Andrea del Sarto* or the *Epistle of Karshish* never have been, and probably never will be surpassed, on their own ground, after their own order. To conceive a drama, to present every side and phase and feature of it from one point of view, to condense all its potentialities of action, all

its significance and import, into some few hundred lines: this has been done by but one poet, and nowhere with such absolute perfection as here. Even when dealing with a mere emotion, Mr. Browning usually crystallizes it into a choice situation; and almost every poem in the series, down to the smallest lyric, is essentially a dramatic monologue. But perhaps the most striking instances of the form and method, and, with the little drama of *In a Balcony*, the principal poems in the collection, are the five blank verse pieces, *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Cleon*, *Karshish* and *Bishop Blougram*. Each is a masterpiece of poetry. Each is in itself a drama, and contains the essence of a life, condensed into a single episode, or indicated in a combination of discourse, conversation, argument, soliloquy, reminiscence. Each, besides being the presentation of a character, moves in a certain atmosphere of its own, philosophical, ethical, or artistic. *Andrea del Sarto* and *Fra Lippo Lippi* deal with art. *Cleon* and *Karshish*, in a sense companion poems, are concerned, each secondarily, with the arts and physical sciences, primarily with the attitude of the Western and Eastern worlds when confronted with the problem of the Gospel of Christ. *Bishop Blougram* is modern, ecclesiastical and argumentative. But however different in form and spirit, however diverse in *milieu*, each is alike the record of a typical soul at a typical moment.

Andrea del Sarto is a "translation into song" of the picture called "Andrea del Sarto and his Wife," now in the Pitti Palace, Florence. It is a perfect re-creation of the Andrea, whose story, as told by Vasari, is one of the saddest in the records of art. The story is well known: how the painter, who at one time seemed as if he might have competed with Raphael, was ruined, as artist and as man, by his beautiful soulless wife, the fatal Lucrezia del Fede; and how, led and lured by her, he outraged his conscience, lowered his ideal, and, losing all heart and hope, sank into

the cold correctness, the unerring fluency, the uniform, melancholy repetition of a single type—his wife's—which distinguish his later works. Mr. Browning has taken his facts from Vasari, and he has taken them quite literally. But what a change, what a transformation and transfiguration ! Instead of a piece of prose biography and criticism, we have (in Mr. Swinburne's appropriate words) "the whole man raised up and reclothed with flesh." No more absolutely creative work has been done in our days ; few more beautiful and pathetic poems written. The mood of sad, wistful, hopeless mournfulness of resignation which the poem expresses, is a somewhat rare one with Mr. Browning's vivid and vivacious genius. It is an autumn twilight piece.

" A common greyness silvers everything,—
 All in a twilight, you and I alike
 —You, at the point of your first pride in me
 (That's gone, you know),—but I, at every point ;
 My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
 To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
 There's the bell clinking from the chapel top ;
 That length of convent-wall across the way
 Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside ;
 The last monk leaves the garden ; days decrease,
 And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
 Eh ? the whole seems to fall into a shape
 As if I saw alike my work and self
 And all that I was born to be and do,
 A twilight-piece."

The very movement of the lines, their very tone and touch, contribute to the effect. A single clear impression is made to result from an infinity of the minutest and scarcely appreciable touches : how fine these touches are, how clear the impression, can only be hinted at in words, can be realised only by a loving and scrupulous study.

Whether the picture which suggested the poem is an authentic work of Andrea, or whether—as experts are now

pretty well agreed—it is a work by an unknown artist representing an imaginary man and woman, is, of course, of no possible consequence in connection with the poem. Nor is it of any more importance that the Andrea of Vasari is in all probability not the real Andrea. Historic fact has nothing to do with poetry: it is mere material, the mere quarry of ideas; and the real truth of Mr. Browning's portrait of Andrea would no more be impugned by the establishment of Vasari's inaccuracy, than the real truth of Shakespeare's portrait of Macbeth by the proof of the untrustworthiness of Holinshed.

A greater contrast, in every respect, than that between *Andrea del Sarto* and *Fra Lippo Lippi*, can scarcely be conceived. The story of Filippo Lippi * is taken, like that of Andrea, from Vasari's *Lives*: it is taken as literally, and, in its way, vivified as clearly. The jolly, jovial tone of the poem, its hearty humour and high spirits, and the breathless rush and hurry of the verse, render the scapegrace painter to the life. Not less in keeping is the situation in which the unsaintly Frate is introduced—caught by the civic guard, past midnight, in an equivocal neighbourhood, quite able and ready, however, to fraternise with his captors, and pour forth, rough and ready, his ideas and adventures. A passage from the poem placed side by side with an extract from Vasari will show how faithfully the record of Fra Lippo's life is followed, and it will also show, in some small measure, the essential newness, the vividness and revelation, of the poet's version.

"By the death of his father," writes Vasari,† "he (Fra Filippo) was left a friendless orphan at the age of two years, his mother also having died shortly after his birth. The child was for some time under

* The picture which Lippo promises to paint (ll. 347-389) is an exact description of his *Coronation of the Virgin*, in the Accademia delle Belle Arti, Florence.

† Mrs. Foster's translation (Bohn).

the care of a certain Mona Lapaccia, his aunt, the sister of his father, who brought him up with great difficulty until he had attained his eighth year, when, being no longer able to support the burden of his maintenance, she placed him in the above-named convent of the Carmelites."

Here is Mr. Browning's account :—

"I was a baby when my mother died
 And father died and left me in the street.
 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
 My stomach being empty as your hat,
 The wind doubled me up and down I went.
 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
 And so along the wall, over the bridge,
 By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
 While I stood munching my first bread that month :
 'So, boy, you 're minded,' quoth the good fat father,
 Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,—
 'To quit this very miserable world?'"

But not only has Mr. Browning given a wonderfully realistic portrait of the man ; a man to whom life in its fulness was the only joy, a true type of the Renaissance spirit, metamorphosed by ironic fate into a monk ; he has luminously indicated the true end and aim of art and the false asceticism of so-called "religious" art, in the characteristic comments and confessions of the first innovator in the traditions of religious painting.

Cleon is prefaced by the text "As certain also of your own poets have said" (*Acts*, xvii. 28), and is supposed to be a letter from one of the poets to whom St. Paul refers, addressed to Protus, an imaginary "Tyrant," whose wondering admiration of Cleon's many-sided culture has drawn him to one who is at once poet, painter, sculptor, musician and philosopher. Compared with such poems as *Andrea del Sarto*, there is little realisable detail, little side-informa-

tion, in the course of the calm argument or statement, but I scarcely see how the temper of the time, among its choicest spirits,—the time of classic decadence, of barren culture, of fruitless philosophy—could well have been more finely shadowed forth. The quality of the versification, unique here as in every one of the five great poems, is perfectly adapted to the subject, and aids considerably in realising the desired effect. The slow sweep of the verse, its stately melody, its large, clear, classic harmony, enable us to receive the right impression as admirably as the other qualities, already pointed out, enable us to feel the resigned sadness of Andrea and the jovial gusto of Lippo. In *Cleon* we have a historical picture, imaginary indeed, but typical. It reveals or records the religious feeling of the pagan world at the time of the coming of Christ; its sadness, dissatisfaction and expectancy, and the failure of its wisdom to fathom the truths of the new Gospel.

In *An Epistle containing the strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician*, we have perhaps a yet more subtle delineation of a character similar by contrast. Cleon is a type of the Western and sceptical, Karshish of the Eastern and believing, attitude of mind; the one repellent, the other absorbent, of new things offered for belief. Karshish, "the picker up of learning's crumbs," writes from Syria to his master at home, "Abib, all sagacious in our art," concerning a man whose singular case has fascinated him, one Lazarus of Bethany. There are few more lifelike and subtly natural narratives in Mr. Browning's poetry; few more absolutely interpenetrated by the finest imaginative sympathy. The scientific caution and technicality of the Arab physician, his careful attempt at a statement of the case from a purely medical point of view, his self-reproachful uneasiness at the strange interest which the man's story has caused in him—the strange credulity which he cannot keep

from encroaching on his mind : all this is rendered with a matchless delicacy and accuracy of touch and interpretation. Nor can anything be finer than the representation of Lazarus after his resurrection—a representation which has significance beyond its literal sense, and points a moral often enforced by the poet,—that doubt and mystery, so frequently complained of in life and in religion, are necessary concomitants of both, without which, indeed, neither religion nor life would be possible. The special point in the tale of Lazarus which has impressed Karshish with so intense an interest is that

“ This man so cured regards the curer, then,
As—God forgive me ! who but God himself,
Creator and sustainer of the world;
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile !
—’Sayeth that such an one was born and lived;
Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house,
Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was . . . what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
In hearing of this very Lazarus
Who saith—but why all this of what he saith ?
Why write of trivial matter, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark ?
I noticed on the margin of a pool
Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange ! ”

How perfectly is here indicated the attitude of the Arab sage, drawn, against himself, to a conviction which he feels ashamed to entertain. As in *Cleon* the very pith of the letter is contained in the postscript, so, after the apologies and farewell greetings of Karshish, the thought which all the time has been burning within him bursts into flame.

“ The very God I think, Abib ; dost thou think ?
So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, ‘ O heart I made, a heart beats here !

‘ Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself !
 ‘ Thou hast no power nor may’st conceive of mine,
 ‘ But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
 ‘ And thou must love me who have died for thee !’
 The madman saith He said so : it is strange.”

So far, the monologues are single-minded, and represent the sincere and frank expression of the thoughts and opinions of their speakers. *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* introduces a new element,—the casuistical. The Bishop’s Apology is, literally, an *ἀπολογία*, a speech in defence of himself, in which the aim is to confound an adversary, not to state the truth. This form, intellectual rather than emotional, argumentative more than dramatic, has had, from this time forward, a considerable attraction for Mr. Browning, and it is responsible for some of his hardest work, such as *Fifine at the Fair* and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* represents the after-dinner talk of a great Roman Catholic dignitary. It is addressed to Mr. Gigadibs, a young and shallow literary man, who poses as free-thinker and as critic of the Bishop’s position. Mr. Gigadibs’ implied opinion is, that a man of Blougram’s intellect and broad views cannot, with honesty, hold and teach Roman Catholic dogmas ; that his position is anomalous and unideal. Blougram retorts with his voluminous and astonishingly clever “apology.” In this apology we trace three distinct elements. First, there is a substratum of truth—truth, that is, in the abstract ; then there is an application of these true principles to his own case and conduct, an application which is thoroughly unjustifiable—

“ He said true things, but called them by wrong names—”

but which serves for an ingenious, and apparently, as regards Gigadibs, a triumphant defence ; finally, there is the real personal element, the man as he is. We are quite at liberty to suppose, even if we were not bound to suppose, that after

all Blougram's defence is merely or partly ironical, and that he is not the contemptible creature he would be if we took him quite seriously. It is no secret that Blougram himself is, in the main, modelled after and meant for Cardinal Wiseman, who, it is said, was the writer of a good-humoured review of the poem in the Catholic journal, *The Rambler* (January, 1856). The supple, nervous strength and swiftness of the blank verse is, in its way, as fine as the qualities we have observed in the other monologues: there is a splendid "go" in it, a vast capacity for business; the verse is literally alive with meaning, packed with thought, instinct with wit and irony; and not this only, but starred with passages of exquisite charm, passages such as the famous one beginning, "Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch," or that other on "how some actor played Death on the stage," or again the superb image of faith triumphant over doubt,—

"Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe."

At least six of the poems contained in *Men and Women* deal with painting and music. But while four of these seem to fall into one group, the remaining two—*Andrea del Sarto* and *Fra Lippo Lippi*—properly belong, though themselves the greatest of the art-poems as art-poems, to the group of monodramas already noticed. But *Old Pictures in Florence*, *The Guardian Angel*, *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha* and *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, are chiefly and distinctively notable in their relation to art, or to some special picture or piece of music.

The Guardian Angel is a "translation into song" of Guercino's picture of that name (*L'Angelo Custode*). It is addressed to "Waring," and was written by Mr. Browning at Ancona, after visiting with Mrs. Browning the church of San Agostino at Fano, which contains the picture. This touching and sympathetic little poem is Mr. Browning's

only detailed description of a picture ; but it is something more than a description, it is an interpretation, and an expression of personal feeling. It is one of the most popular in style and sentiment of all his pieces. *Old Pictures in Florence* is a humorous and earnest moralising on the meaning and mission of art and the rights and wrongs of artists, suggested by some of the old pictures in Florence. It contains perhaps the most complete and particular statement of Mr. Browning's artistic principles that we have anywhere in his works, as well as a very noble and energetic outburst of indignant enthusiasm on behalf of the "early masters," the lesser older men whom the world slurs over or forgets. The principles which Mr. Browning imputes to the early painters may be applied to poetry as well as to art. Very characteristic and significant is the insistence on the deeper value of life, of soul, than of mere expression or technique, or even of mere unbreathing beauty. *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha* is the humorous soliloquy of an imaginary organist, apropos of a fugue in F minor by an imaginary composer, named in the title. It is a mingling of music and moralising. The famous description of a fugue, and the personification of its five voices, is a brilliantly ingenious *tour de force* ; and the rough humour is quite in keeping with the *dramatis persona*. In complete contrast to *Master Hugues* is *A Toccata of Galuppi's*,* one of the daintiest, most musical, most witching and haunting of Mr. Browning's poems. It is a vision of Venice evoked from the shadowy Toccata, a vision of that delicious, brilliant, evanescent, worldly life, when

"Balls and masks began at midnight, burning ever to midday,"

* Baldassarre Galuppi, surnamed Buranello (1706-1785), was a Venetian composer of some distinction. "He was an immensely prolific composer," says Vernon Lee, "and abounded in melody, tender, pathetic, brilliant, which in its extreme simplicity and slightness occasionally rose to the highest beauty."—*Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, p. 101.

and the lover and his lady would break off their talk to listen while Galuppi

“Sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord.”

But a note of sadness soon creeps in.

“Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned :
‘Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.

* * * * *

‘Dust and ashes!’ So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.”

In this poem Mr. Browning has called up before us the whole aspect of Venetian life in the eighteenth century. In three other poems, among the most remarkable that he has ever written—*A Grammarian’s Funeral*, *The Heretic’s Tragedy* and *Holy-Cross Day*—he has realised and represented the life and temper of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. *A Grammarian’s Funeral*, “shortly after the Revival of Learning in Europe,” gives the nobler spirit of the earlier pioneers of the Renaissance, men like Cyriac of Ancona and Filelfo, devoted pedants who broke ground in the restoration to the modern world of the civilisation and learning of ancient Greece and Rome. It gives this, the nobler and earlier spirit, as finely as *The Tomb at St. Praxed’s* gives the later and grosser. In Mr. Browning’s hands the figure of the old grammarian becomes heroic. “He settled *Hoti’s* business,” true; but he did something more than that. It is the spirit in which the work is done, rather than the special work itself, here only relatively important, which is glorified. Is it too much to say that this is the noblest of all requiems ever chanted over the grave of the scholar?

‘Here’s the top peak; the multitude below

Live, for they can, there:

This man decided not to Live but Know—

Bury this man there

Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
 Lightnings are loosened,
 Stars come and go ! Let joy break with the storm,
 Peace let the dew send !
 Lofty designs must close in like effects :
 Loftily lying,
 Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
 * Living or dying."

The union of humour with intense seriousness, of the grotesque with the stately, is one that only Mr. Browning could have compassed, and the effect is singularly appropriate. As the disciples of the old humanist bear their dead master up to his grave on the mountain-top, chanting their dirge and eulogy, the lines of the poem seem actually to move to the steady climbing rhythm of their feet.

The Heretic's Tragedy: a Middle-Age Interlude, is described by the author as "a glimpse from the burning of Jacques du Bourg-Molay [last Grand-Master of the Templars], A.D. 1314, as distorted by the refraction from Flemish brain to brain during the course of a couple of centuries." Of all Mr. Browning's mediæval poems this is perhaps the greatest, as it is certainly the most original, the most astonishing. Its special "note" is indescribable, for there is nothing with which we can compare it. If I say that it is perhaps the finest example in English poetry of the pure grotesque, I shall fail to interpret it aright to those who think of the grotesque as a synonym for the ugly and debased. If I call it fantastic, I shall do it less than justice in suggesting a certain lightness and flimsiness which are quite alien to its profound seriousness, a seriousness which touches on sublimity. Mr. Browning's power of sculpturing single situations is seldom shown in finer relief than in those poems in which he has seized upon some "occult eccentricity of history" or of legend, like this of *The Heretic's Tragedy*, or that in *Holy-Cross Day*, fashioning it into some quaint, curt, tragi-comic form. *Holy-Cross*

Day expresses the feelings of the Jews, who were forced on this day (the 14th September) to attend an annual Christian sermon in Rome. A deliciously naïve extract from an imaginary *Diary by the Bishop's Secretary*, 1600, first sets forth the orthodox view of the case; then the poem tells us "what the Jews really said." Surely nothing more audaciously sardonico-mirthful was ever written than the first part of this poem, with its

**" Fee, faw, fum ! bubble and squeak !
Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week ; "**

while the sudden transition to the sublime and steadfast Song of Death of Rabbi ben Ezra is an effect worthy of Heine—more than worthy. Heine would inevitably have put his tongue in his cheek again at the end.

With the three great mediæval poems should be named *Protus*, a slighter sketch in perhaps a little the same line. The first and last lines, describing two imaginary busts, are a fine instance of Mr. Browning's power of translating sense into sound. Compare the smooth and sweet melody of the opening lines—

“ Among these latter busts we count by scores
Half-emperors and quarter-emperors,

One loves a baby-face, with violets there—
Violets instead of laurels in the hair,—
As they were all the little locks could bear : ”

compare these with the rasping vigour and strength of sound which point the contrast of the conclusion :—

**"Here's John the Smith's rough-hammered head. Great eye,
Gross jaw and gripped lips do what granite can
To give you the crown-grasper. What a man!"**

One poem of absolutely unique order is the romance of "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*." If it were not for certain lines, certain metaphors and images, here and there in his earlier works we should find in this poem an excep-

tion to the rule of Mr. Browning's writings so singular and startling as to be almost phenomenal. But in passages of *Pauline*, of *Paracelsus*, of the lyric written in 1836, and incorporated, more than twenty years later, with *James Lee's Wife*, we have distinct evidence of a certain reserve, as it were, of romantic sensibility, a certain tendency, which we may consider to have been consciously checked rather than early exhausted, toward the weird and fanciful. In *Childe Roland* whatever of this there may be latent in the poet receives full and final expression. The poem is very generally supposed to be an allegory, and a number of ingenious interpretations have been suggested, defining the "Dark Tower" as Love, Life, Death, Truth, etc. But, as a matter of fact, Mr. Browning, in writing it, had no allegorical intention whatever. It was meant to be, and is, a pure romance. It was suggested by the line from Shakespeare which heads it, and was "built up," in Mrs. Orr's words, "of picturesque impressions, which have separately or collectively produced themselves in the author's mind, . . . including a tower which Mr. Browning once saw in the Carrara Mountains, a painting which caught his eye years later in Paris; and the figure of a horse in the tapestry in his own drawing-room." * The poem depicts the last adventure of a knight vowed to the quest of a certain "Dark Tower." The description of his journey across a strange and dreadful country is one of the ghastliest and most vivid in all poetry; ghastly without hope, without alleviation, without a momentary touch of contrast; vivid and ghastly as the lines following:—

" A sudden little river crossed my path
 As unexpected as a serpent comes.
 No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;
 This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath
 For the fiend's glowing hoof—to see the wrath
 Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

* *Handbook*, p. 266. The poem was written at Paris, January 3, 1852.

- " So petty yet so spiteful ! All along,
 How scrubby alders kneeled down over it ;
 Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit
 Of mute despair, a suicidal throng :
 The river which had done them all the wrong,
 Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.
- " Which, while I forded,—good saints, how I feared
 To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
 Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
 For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard !
 —It may have been a water-rat I speared,
 But, ugh ! it sounded like a baby's shriek."

The manner of the poem, perfectly unlike that of any other poem whatever, may be described by varying Flaubert's phrase of "epic realism": it is romantic realism. The weird, fantastic and consummately imaginative picture brought with unparalleled vividness before us, is not painted in a style of vague suggestiveness, but in a hard, distinct, definite, realistic way, the realism which results from a faithful record of distorted impressions. The poet's imagination here is not lost in space, but, like a flash of lightning cleaving the darkness of midnight, and flashing hither and thither over earth, it illumines point by point, with a momentary and fearful distinctness, the horrors of the landscape.

A large and important group of *Men and Women* consists of love-poems, or poems dealing, generally in some concrete and dramatic way, sometimes in a purely lyrical manner, with the emotion of love. *Love among the Ruins* is the idyl of a lovers' meeting. The emotion which it contains is emphasised and developed by the contrast of its *mise en scène*. The lovers meet in a turret among the ruins of an ancient city, and the moment chosen is immediately before their meeting, when the youth gazes around him, struck into sudden meditation by the vision of the mighty city fallen and the living might of Love.

“ And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
In such peace,
And the slopes and rills and undistinguished grey
Melt away—
That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
Waits me there
In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul
For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb,
Till I come.

“ For he looked upon the city, every side,
Far and wide,
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades’
Colonnades,
All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,—and then,
All the men !
When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
Each on each.

“ In one year they sent a million fighters forth
South and North,
And they built their gods a brazen pillar high
As the sky,
Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—
Gold, of course.
Oh heart ! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns !
Earth’s returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin !
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest !
Love is best.”

The metre, so far as I know, is unique, and it is beautifully adapted to the tone and rhythm—the quietness and fervent meditation—of the subject. *A Lovers’ Quarrel* is in every

respect a contrast. It is a whimsical and delicious lyric, with a flowing and leaping melody, a light and piquant music deepened into pathos by a mournful undertone. It is a retrospect and a regret, not without a hope for the future. The mingling of playfulness and pathos is very effective. *Evelyn Hope* strikes a tenderer note ; it is one of Mr. Browning's sweetest, simplest, and most pathetic pieces, and embodies, in a concrete form, one of his deepest convictions. It is the lament of a man, no longer young, by the death-bed of a young girl whom he has loved, unknown to her. She has died and scarcely known him, never known his love. But what matter ? God creates love to reward love, and there is another life to come.

" So, hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep
 See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand !
 There, that is our secret : go to sleep !
 You will wake, and remember, and understand.

A Woman's Last Word is an exquisite little lyric which sings itself to its own music of delicate gravity and gentle pathos ; but it too holds, in its few small lines, a complete situation, that most pathetic one in which a woman resolves to merge her individuality in the wish and will of her husband, to bind, for his sake, her intellect in the chains of her heart.

" A WOMAN'S LAST WORD.

I.

" Let's contend no more, Love,
 Strive nor weep :
 All be as before, Love,
 —Only sleep !

II.

" What so wild as words are ?
 I and thou
 In debate, as birds are,
 Hawk on bough !

III.

" See the creature stalking
While we speak !
Ilush and hide the talking,
Cheek on cheek !

IV.

' What so false as truth is,
False to thee ?
Where the serpent's tooth is,
Shun the tree—

V.

" Where the apple reddens
Never pry—
Lest we lose our Edens,
Eve and I.

VI.

" Be a god and hold me
With a charm !
Be a man and fold me
With thine arm !

VII.

" 'Teach me, only teach, Love !
As I ought
I will speak thy speech, Love,
Think thy thought—

VIII.

" Meet, if thou require it,
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands.

IX.

" That shall be to-morrow
Not to-night :
I must bury sorrow
Out of sight :

X.

" —Must a little weep, Love,
(Foolish me !)
And so fall asleep, Love,
Loved by thee."

Any Wife to any Husband is the grave and mournful lament of a dying woman, addressed to the husband whose love has never wavered throughout her life, but whose faithlessness to her memory she foresees. The situation is novel in poetry, and it is realised with an intense sympathy and depth of feeling. The tone of dignified sadness in the woman's words—never passionate or pleading, only confirmed and hopeless—is admirably rendered in the slow and solemn metre, whose firm smoothness and regularity translate into sound the sentiment of the speech. *A Serenade at the Villa*, which expresses a hopeless love from the man's side, is a tenderly sad and sweet little piece. It has a special picturesqueness, and something more than picturesqueness. Nature and life are in throbbing sympathy. The little touches of description give one the very sense of the hot thundrous summer night as it "sultrily suspires" in sympathy with the disconsolate lover at his fruitless serenading. *Two in the Campagna* presents a more intricate situation than most of the love-poems. It is the lament of a man, addressed to the woman at his side, whom he loves and by whom he is loved, over the imperfection and innocent inconstancy of his love. The two can never quite grow to one, and he, oppressed by the terrible burden of imperfect sympathies, is for ever seeking, realising, losing, then again seeking the spiritual union still for ever denied. The vague sense of the Roman Campagna is distilled into exquisite words, and through all there sounds the sad and weary undertone of baffled endeavour—

" Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

The Last Ride Together is one of those love-poems which I have spoken of as specially noble and unique, and it is, I think, the noblest and most truly unique of them all. Thought, emotion and melody are mingled in perfect

measure: it has the lyrical "cry," and the objectiveness of the drama. The situation, sufficiently indicated in the title, is selected with a choice and happy instinct: the very motion of riding is given in the rhythm. Every line throbs with passion, or with a fervid meditation which is almost passion, and in the last verse, and, still more, in the single line—

"Who knows but the world may end to-night?"—

the dramatic intensity strikes as with an electric shock.⁶

By the Fireside, though in all its circumstances purely dramatic and imaginary, rises again and again to the fervour of personal feeling, and we can hardly be wrong in classing it, in soul though not in circumstance, with *One Word More* and the other sacred poems which enshrine the memory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But, apart from this suggestion, the poem is a masterpiece of subtle simplicity and picturesqueness. Nothing could be more admirable in themselves than the natural descriptions throughout the poem; but these are never mere isolated descriptions, nor even a mere stationary background: they are fused with the emotion which they both help to form and assist in revealing.

Of *One Word More* (*To E. B. B.*) no word that could ever be said might be other than utterly inadequate. It is one of those sacred poems in which, once and again, a great poet has embalmed in immortal words the holiest and deepest emotion of his existence. Here, and here only in the songs consecrated by the poet-husband to the poet-wife, the living love that too soon became a memory is still "a hope, to sing by gladly." *One Word More* is the complement to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. And even as Mrs. Browning never wrote anything more perfect than the *Sonnets*, so Mr. Browning has never written anything more perfect than the answering lyric.

Yet another section of this most richly varied volume consists of poems, narrative and lyrical, dealing in a brief and pregnant way with some special episode or emotion—love, in some instances, but in a less exclusive way than in the love-poems proper. *The Statue and the Bust* (one of Mr. Browning's best narratives) is a romantic and mainly true tale, written in *terza rima*, but in short lines. The story on which it is founded is a Florentine tradition.

"In the piazza of the SS. Annunziata at Florence is an equestrian statue of the Grand Duke Ferdinand the First, representing him as riding away from the church, with his head turned in the direction of the Riccardi [now Antinori] Palace, which occupies one corner of the square. Tradition asserts that he loved a lady whom her husband's jealousy kept a prisoner there; and that he avenged his love by placing himself in effigy where his glance could always dwell upon her." *

In the poem the lovers agree to fly together, and only indecision and postponement prevent them from carrying out their purpose. Mr. Browning characteristically blames them for their sin of "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin," for their vacillating purpose, their failure in attaining "their life's set end," whatever that end might be. Despite the difficulty of the metre, the verse is singularly fresh and musical. In this poem, the first in which Mr. Browning has used the *terza rima*, he observes, with only occasional licence, the proper pause at the end of each stanza of three lines. This law, though rarely neglected by Dante, has seldom been observed by the few English poets who have attempted the measure. Neither Byron in the *Prophecy of Dante*, nor Shelley in *The Triumph of Life*, nor Mrs. Browning in *Casa Guidi Windows*, has done so. In Mr. Browning's later poems in this metre, the pause, as if of set purpose, is wholly disregarded.

How it strikes a Contemporary is at once a dramatic

* Mrs. Orr, *Handbook*, p. 201.

monologue and a piece of poetic criticism. Under the Spanish dress, and beneath the humorous treatment, it is easy to see a very distinct, suggestive and individual theory of poetry, and in the poet who "took such cognizance of men and things, . . .

"Of all thought, said and acted, then went home
And wrote it fully to our Lord the King—"

we have, making full allowance for the imaginary dramatic circumstances (and surely nothing could be more comically far from the fact) a very good likeness of a poet of Mr. Browning's order. Another poem, "*Transcendentalism*," is a slighter piece of humorous criticism—possibly self-criticism—addressed to one who "speaks" his thoughts instead of "singing" them.

Before and *After* (the duel) realise between them a single and most striking situation. *Before* is spoken by a friend of the wronged man; *After* by the wronged man himself. The latter is not excelled by any poem of Mr. Browning's in its terrible conciseness, its intensity of stifled passionate utterance.

"AFTER.

- "Take the cloak from his face, and at first
Let the corpse do its worst !
- "How he lies in his rights of a man !
Death has done all death can.
And, absorbed in the new life he leads,
He recks not, he heeds
Nor his wrong nor my vengeance ; both strike
On his senses alike,
And are lost in the solemn and strange
Surprise of the change.
- "Ha, what avails death to erase
His offence, my disgrace ?
I would we were boys as of old
In the field, by the fold
His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn,
Were so easily borne !

"I stand here now, he lies in his place :
Cover the face !"

I know of no piece of verse in the language which has more of the quality and hush of *awe* in it than this little fragment of eighteen lines.

*Instans Tyrannus** (the Threatening Tyrant) recalls by its motive, however different it may be as a poem, the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*. The situations are widely different, but the root of each is identical. In both is developed the mood of passive or active hate, arising from mere instinctive dislike. But while in the earlier poem the theme is treated with boisterous sardonic humour, it is here embodied in the grave figure of a stern, single-minded, relentless hater—a tyrant in both senses of the term. Another poem, representing an act of will, though here love, not hate, impels, is *Mesmerism*. The intense absorption, the breathless eagerness of the mesmerist, are rendered, in a manner truly marvellous, by the breathless and yet measured race of the verses—fifteen of them succeed one another without a single full-stop, or a real pause in sense or sound. I know nothing like it in poetry. The beautiful and significant little poem called *The Patriot : an Old Story*, is a narrative and parable at once, and only too credible and convincing as each. The three stanzas of *Respectability* present a very vivid and taking picture of a refined Bohemianism, not unlike that represented in several of the *Dramatis Personæ*. Both here and in another short suggestive poem, *A Light Woman* (which might be called the fourth act of a tragedy), the situation is outlined like a silhouette. Equally graphic, in the more ordinary sense of the term, is the picturesque and whimsical view of town and country life taken by a frivolous Italian person of quality in the poem named *Up at a Villa*—

* The poem was suggested by the opening of the third ode of the Third Book of Horace—"Justum et tenacem propositi virum," etc.

Down in the City—"a masterpiece of irony and of description," as an Italian critic has defined it.

Of the wealth of lyrics and short poems—gems of as rare a brilliance as their larger companions—no really adequate mention can here be made. Yet I cannot pass without a word, if only in a word may I indicate, the admirable craftsmanship and playful dexterity of the lines on *A Pretty Woman*; the pathetic feeling and the exquisite and novel music of *Love in a Life* and *Life in a Love*; the tense emotion, the suppressed and hopeful passion, of *In Three Days*, and the sweet and infinitely sad and haunting song of *In a Year*, with its winding and liquid melody, its mournful and wondering lament over love forgotten; the rich and marvellously modulated music, the glowing colour, vivid and passionate fancy, of *Women and Roses*; the fresh-felicity of "*De Gustibus*," with its enthusiasm for Italy, scarcely less fervid than the English enthusiasm of the *Home-Thoughts*; the quaint humour and pregnant simplicity of the admirable little parable of *The Twins*; the sympathetic charm and light touch of *Misconceptions*, and the pretty figurative fancy of *My Star*; the strong, sad, suggestive little poem named *One Way of Love*, with its delicately-wrought companion *Another Way of Love*, the former a love-lyric to be classed with *The Lost Mistress* and *The Last Ride Together*; and, finally, the epilogue to the first volume and a late poem in the second,—*Memorabilia*, a tribute to Shelley, full of grateful remembrance and admiring love, significant among the few personal utterances of the poet, and the far lovelier poem and only less fervent tribute to Keats, the superb and gorgeous-coloured lines on *Popularity*. A careful study, or even, one would think, a careless perusal, of but a few of the poems named above, should be enough to show, once and for all, the infinite richness and variety of Mr. Browning's melody, and his complete mastery over the most simple and the most intricate lyric

measures. As an example of the finest artistic simplicity, rich with restrained pathos and quiet with keen tension of feeling, we may choose the following.

“ ONE WAY OF LOVE.

I.

“ All June I bound the rose in sheaves.
Now, rose by rose, I strip the leaves
And strew them where Pauline may pass.
She will not turn aside? Alas!
Let them lie. Suppose they die?
The chance was they might take her eye.

II.

“ How many a month I strove to suit
These stubborn fingers to the lute!
To-day I venture all I know.
She will not hear my music? So!
Break the string; fold music's wing:
Suppose Pauline had bade me sing?

III.

“ My whole life long I learned to love.
This hour my utmost art I prove
And speak my passion—heaven or hell?
She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well!
Love who may—I still can say,
Those who win heaven, blest are they!”

IN A BALCONY.*

[Written at Bagni di Lucca, 1853; published in *Men and Women*, above; reprinted in *Poetical Works*, 1863, under a separate heading; *id.*, 1868 (Vol. VI., pp. 1—37). Performed at the Browning Society's Third Annual Entertainment, Prince's Hall, Piccadilly, Nov. 28, 1884.]

The dramatic scene of *In a Balcony* is the last of the works written in dialogue. We have seen, in tracing the

* It will be more convenient to treat *In a Balcony* in a separate section than under the general heading of *Men and Women*, for it is, to all intents and purposes, an independent work of another order.

course of the plays from *Strafford* to *A Soul's Tragedy*, how the playwright gave place to the poet; how the stage construction, the brisk and interchanged dialogue of the earlier dramas, gradually and inevitably developed into the more subtle, the more lengthy dialogue—which itself approached more and more nearly to monologue—of the later ones. *In a Balcony*, written eight years later than *A Soul's Tragedy*, has more affinity with it, in form at least, than with any other of the plays. But while the situation there was purely intellectual and moral, it is here passionate* and highly-wrought, to a degree never before reached, save in the crowning scene of *Pippa Passes*. Indeed, so powerful, so tragically intense is this later scene, that it may stand even or almost beside the earlier. We must go to the greatest among the Elizabethans to exceed that; we must turn to *Le Roi s'amuse* to equal this.

The situation is, in one sense, extremely subtle; in another, remarkably simple. The action takes place within a few hours, on a balcony at night. Norbert and Constance are two lovers. Norbert is in the service of a certain Queen, to whom he has, by his diplomatic skill and labour, rendered immense services. His aim, all the while, though unknown, as he thinks, to her, has been the hope of winning Constance, the Queen's cousin and dependant. He is now about to claim her as his recompense; but Constance, fearing for the result, persuades him, reluctant though he is, to ask in a roundabout way, so as to flatter or touch the Queen. He over-acts his part. The Queen, a heart-starved and now ageing woman, believes that he loves her, and responds to him with the passion of a long-thwarted nature. She announces the wonderful news, with more than the ecstasy of a girl, to Constance. Constance resolves to resign her lover, for his good and the Queen's, and, when he appears, she endeavours to make him understand and enter into her plot. But he cannot and will not see it.

In the presence of the Queen he declares his love for Constance, and for her alone. The Queen goes out, in white silence. The lovers embrace in new knowledge and fervour of love. Measured steps are heard within, and we know that the guard is approaching.

Each of the three characters is admirably delineated. Norbert is a fine, strong, solid, noble character, without subtlety or mixture of motives. He loves Constance: he knows that his love is returned: he is resolved to win her hand. From first to last he is himself—honest, straightforward, single-minded, passionate; presenting the most perfect contrast to Constance's feminine over-subtlety. Constance is more, very much more, of a problem: "a character," as Mr. Wedmore has admirably said, "peculiarly wily for goodness, curiously rich in resource for unalloyed and inexperienced virtue." Does her proposal to relinquish Norbert in favour of the Queen show her to have been lacking in love for him? It has been said, on the one hand, that her act was "noble and magnanimous," on the other hand, that the act proved her nature to be "radically insincere and inconstant." Probably the truth lies between these two extremes. Her love, we cannot doubt, was true and intense up to the measure of her capacity; but her nature was, instinctively, less outspoken and truthful than Norbert's, more subtle, more reasoning. At the critical moment she is seized by a whirl of emotions, and, with very feminine but singularly unloverlike instinct, she resolves, as she would phrase it, to sacrifice *herself*, not seeing that she is insulting her lover by the very notion of his accepting such a sacrifice. Her character has not the pure and steadfast nobility of Norbert's, but it is truly devoted, and very human. The Queen, unlike Constance, but like Norbert, is simple and single in nature. She is a tragic and intense figure, at once pathetic and terrible. The part allotted to her is as vivid, poignant and affecting as words can make it. I am

not aware that the peculiarly pregnant motive—the hidden longing for love in a starved and stunted nature, clogged with restrictions of state and ceremony, harassed and hampered by circumstances and by the weight of advancing years—the passionate longing suddenly met, as it seems, with reward, and breaking out into a great flame of love and ardour, only to be rudely and finally quenched—I am not aware that this motive has ever elsewhere been worked out in dramatic poetry. As here developed, it is among the great situations in literature.

The verse in which this little tragedy is written is perhaps richer, more masterly and more sympathetic than that of any of the formal dramas. It has a strong and fine harmony, a weight of meaning and choice of imagery, and above all a perfect flexibility and expressiveness, which distinctly belong to the period of *Andrea del Sarto* and the other great monologues.

6. DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

[Published in 1864 (*Poetical Works*, 1868, Vol. VI., pp. 39-227).].

Dramatis Personæ, like *Men and Women* (which it followed after an interval of nine years), is a collection of dramatic monologues, in each of which it is attempted to delineate a single character or a single mood by setting the "imaginary person" in some revealing situation. Of the two possible methods—speech and soliloquy—Mr. Browning very generally prefers the former. In *Dramatis Personæ*, however, he recurs, rather more frequently than usual, to the latter; and the situations imaged are usually suggestive rather than explicit, more incomplete and indirect than those in the *Men and Women*. As an ingenious critic said, a little after the volume was published, "Mr.

Browning lets us overhear a part of the drama, generally a soliloquy, and we must infer the rest. Had he to give the story of *Hamlet*, he would probably embody it in three stanzas, the first beginning, 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt!' the second 'To be or not to be, that is the question;' and the third, 'Look here upon this picture, and on that!' From these disjointed utterances the reader would have to construct the story." Here our critic's clever ingenuity carries him a little too far; but there is some truth in his definition or description of the special manner which characterises such poems as *Too Late*, or *The Worst of It*. But not merely the manner of presentment, the substance, and also the style and versification, have undergone a change during the long-silent years which lie between *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ*. The first note of change—of the change which makes us speak of earlier and later work—is here sounded. From 1833 up to 1855 forms a single period of steady development, of gradual and unswerving ascent. *Dramatis Personæ* stands on the border line between this period and another, the "later period," which more decisively begins with *The Ring and the Book*. Still, the first note of divergence is certainly sounded here. I might point to the profound intellectual depth of certain pieces as its characteristic, or, equally, to the traces here and there of an apparent carelessness of workmanship; or, yet again, to the new and very marked partiality for scenes and situations of English and modern rather than mediæval and foreign life.

The larger part of the volume consists of dramatic monologues. Three only are in blank verse; the greater number in varied lyric measures. The first of these, and the longest, *James Lee*, as it was first called, *James Lee's Wife*,* as it is now more appropriately named, is a *Lieder*

* The first six stanzas of the sixth section of this poem—the splendid song of the wind—were published in a Magazine, as *Lines*, in 1836. Parts

Kreis, or cycle of songs, nine in number, which reveal, in "tragic hints," not by means of a connected narrative, the history of an unhappy marriage. There is nothing of heroic action or suffering in it; it is one of those old stories ever new which are always tragic to one at least of the actors in them, and which may be tragic or trivial in record, according as the artist is able to mould his material. Each of the sections shows us a mood, signalized by some slight link of circumstance which may the better enable us to grasp it. The development of disillusion, the melancholy progress of change, is finely indicated in the successive stages of the lyric sequence, from the first clear strain of believing love (shaken already by a faint tremor of fear), through gradual alienation and inevitable severance, to the final resolved parting. This poem is worthy of notice as the only one in which Mr. Browning has employed the sequence form—almost the only instance, indeed, in which he has structurally varied his metre in the course of a poem.

James Lee's Wife is written in the form of soliloquy or reflection. In two other poems, closely allied to it in sentiment, *The Worst of it* and *Too Late*, intense feeling expresses itself, though in solitude, as if the object of emotion were present; each is, in great part, a mental appeal to some one loved and lost. In *James Lee's Wife* a woman was the speaker, and the burden of her lament was mere estrangement. *The Worst of it* and *Too Late* are both spoken by men. The former is the utterance of a man whose wife has been false to him; the latter of a man whose loved one is dead. But in each case the situation is further complicated. The woman over whose loss of virtue her forsaken husband mourns with passionate anguish and unavailing bitterness of regret, has been to him—him whom she now leaves for another—an image of purity: her love

II. & III., of Section VIII. (except the last two lines) were added to the poem in 1868.

and influence have lifted *him* up from the mire, and "the worst of it"—the last pang which he cannot nerve himself to endure—is the knowledge that she has saved him, and, partly at least through him, ruined herself. The poem is one of the most passionate and direct of Mr. Browning's dramatic lyrics: it is thrillingly intense and alive; and the swift force and tremulous eagerness of its very original rhythm and metre translate its sense into sound with perfect fitness. Similar in cadence, though different in arrangement, is the measure of *Too Late*, with its singularly constructed stanza of two quatrains, followed respectively by two couplets, which together made another quatrain. It is worth noticing how admirably and uniformly Mr. Browning contrives to connect, in sound, the two halves of the broken quatrains, placing them so as to complete each other, and relieve our ear of the sense of distance. The poem is spoken by a lover who was neither rejected nor accepted: like the lover of Evelyn Hope, he never told his love. His Edith married another, a heartless and soulless lay-figure of a poet (or so at least his rival regards him), and now she is dead. His vague but vivid hopes—hopes of some future chance to love her and be loved; the dull rebellion of rashly reasoning sorrow; the remembrance, the repentance, the regret; are all poured out with most pathetic naturalness.

These three poems are soliloquies: *Dis aliter Visum*; or, *Le Byron de nos Jours*, a poem closely akin in sentiment and style, recurs to the more frequent and perhaps preferable manner of speech to an imagined listener. It is written in that favourite stanza of five lines, on which Mr. Browning has played so many variations: here, perhaps, in the internal rhyme so oddly placed, the newest and most ingenious of all. The sentiment and situation are the exact complement or contrast of those expressed in *By the Fireside*. There, fate and nature have brought to a crisis the latent love of

two persons : the opportunity is seized, and the crown of life obtained. Here, in circumstances singularly similar, the vital moment is let slip, the tide is *not* taken at the turn. And ten years afterwards, when the famous poet and the girl whom he all but let himself love, meet in a Paris drawing-room, and one of them tells the old tale over for the instruction of both, she can point out, with bitter earnestness and irony (and a perfect little touch of feminine nature) his fatal mistake.

Youth and Art is a slighter and more humorous sketch, touching on somewhat the same point. It is a bit of wise humour, sharp characterisation and ballad-like simplicity, as good, in a way only slightly different, as a *lied* of Heine. Still more perfect a poem, still more subtle, still more Heinesque—this, indeed, *must* be Heine—is the little piece called *Confessions*. The pathetic, humorous, rambling snatch of final memory in the dying man, addressed, by a delightful irony, to the attendant clergyman, is inimitable.

“ CONFESSIONS.

I.

“ What is he buzzing in my ears ?
 ‘ Now that I come to die,
 ‘ Do I view the world as a vale of tears ? ’
 Ah, reverend sir, not I !

II.

“ What I viewed there once, what I view again
 Where the physic bottles stand
 On the table’s edge,—is a suburb lane,
 With a wall to my bedside hand.

III.

“ That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,
 From a house you could descry
 O’er the garden wall : is the curtain blue
 Or green to a healthy eye ?

IV.

"To mine, it serves for the old June weather
Blue above lane and wall ;
And that farthest bottle labelled " Ether "
Is the house o'er-topping all.

V.

" At a terrace, somewhat near the stopper,
There watched for me, one June,
A girl : I know, sir, it's improper,
My poor mind's out of tune.

VI.

" Only, there was a way . . you crept
Close by the side, to dodge
Eyes in the house, two eyes except :
They styled their house ' The Lodge.'

VII.

What right had a lounge up their lane ?
But, by creeping very close,
With the good wall's help,—their eyes might strain
And stretch themselves to Oes,

VIII.

" Yet never catch her and me together,
As she left the attic, there,
By the rim of the bottle labelled ' Ether,'
And stole from stair to stair,

-IX.

" And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
We loved, sir—used to meet :
How sad and bad and mad it was—
But then, how it was sweet ! "

If any one can read these last two lines without that thrill of exultation with which the heart in us leaps up at the touch of a master-hand, he must surely be destitute of the very feeling to realise it.

A Likeness forms a third, and a worthy third, to these two fine and subtle studies of modern English life. It is one of those poems which, because they seem simple and superficial, and can be galloped off the tongue in a racing jingle,

we are apt to underrate or overlook. Yet it would be difficult to find a more vivid bit of *genre* painting than the three-panelled picture in this single frame.

The three blank verse poems which complete the series of purely dramatic composition—*A Death in the Desert*, *Caliban upon Setebos* and *Mr. Sludge*, "*The Medium*"—are more elaborate than any yet named. They follow, to a considerable extent, the form of the great blank verse monologues which are the glory of *Men and Women*. Alike in their qualities and defects they represent a further step in development. The next step will lead to the elaborate and extended monologues which comprise the greater part of Mr. Browning's later works.

A Death in the Desert is an argument in a dramatic frame-work. The situation imaged is that of the mysterious death of St. John in extreme old age. The background to the last utterance of the apostle is painted with marvellous brilliance and tenderness : every circumstance is conceived and represented in Mr. Browning's unique style, in which a word is equal to a touch of the brush of a great painter. But, delicately as the verisimilitudes are preserved, it is as a piece of ratiocination—suffused, indeed, with imagination—that the poem seems to have its *raison d'être*. The bearing of this argument on contemporary theories may to some appear a merit, to others a blemish. To make the dying John refute Strauss or Renan, handling their propositions with admirable dialectical skill, is certainly, on the face of it, somewhat hazardous. But I can see no real incongruity in imputing to the seer of Patmos a prophetic insight into the future—no real inconsequence in imagining the opponent of Cerinthus spending his last breath in the defence of Christian truth against a foreseen scepticism. In style, the poem a little recalls *Cleon* ; with less of harmonious grace and clear classic outline, it possesses a certain stilled sweetness, a meditative tender-

ness, all its own, and beautifully appropriate to the utterance of the "beloved disciple."

*Caliban upon Setebos ; or, Natural Theology in the Island,** is more of a creation, and really a greater poem, than *A Death in the Desert*. It is sometimes forgotten that there is in Art a region named the Grotesque. This has been well defined by Mr. J. Cotter Morison, in a paper on this very poem, read before the Browning Society. "Its proper province," he writes, "would seem to be the exhibition of fanciful power by the artist ; not beauty or truth in the literal sense at all, but inventive affluence of unreal yet absurdly comic forms, with just a flavour of the terrible added, to give a grim dignity, and save from the triviality of caricature."† With the doubtful exception of *The Heretic's Tragedy*, *Caliban upon Setebos* is probably the finest piece of grotesque art in the language. Mr. Browning's Caliban, unlike Shakespeare's, has no active part to play : if he has ever seen Stephano and Trinculo, he has forgotten it. He simply sprawls on the ground "now that the heat of day is best," and expounds to himself, for his own edification, his system of Natural Theology. I think Mr. Huxley has said that the poem is a truly scientific representation of the development of religious ideas in primitive man. It needed the subtlest of poets to apprehend and interpret the undeveloped ideas and sensations of a rudimentary and transitionally human creature like Caliban, to turn his dumb stirrings of quaint fancies into words, and to do all this without a discord. The finest poetical effect is in the close : it is indeed one of the finest effects,—climaxes, *surprises*,—in literature. Caliban has been venturing to talk rather disrespectfully of his God ; believing himself overlooked, he has allowed himself to speak out his mind on religious questions.

* The poem was originally preceded by the text, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself" (*Ps.* l. 21).

† *Browning Society's Papers*, Part V., p. 493.

He chuckles to himself in safe self-complacency. All at once—

“What, what? A curtain o’er the world at once!
 Crickets stop hissing; not a bird—or, yes,
 There scuds His raven that hath told Him all!
 It was fool’s play, this prattling! Ha! The wind
 Shoulders the pillared dust, death’s house o’ the move,
 And fast invading fires begin! White blaze—
 A tree’s head snaps—and there, there, there, there,
 His thunder follows! Fool to jibe at Him!
 Lo! ’Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
 ’Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
 Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
 One little mess of whelks, so he may ’scape!”

Mr. Sludge “*The Medium*” is equally remote from both the other poems in blank verse. It is a humorous and realistic tale of modern spiritualism, acted out in a Boston parlour amid the odours of whiskey and cigars. Like *Bishop Blougram*, it is at once an exposure and an apologia. As a piece of analytic portraiture it would be difficult to surpass; and it is certainly a fault on the right side if the poet has endowed his precious blackguard with a dialectical head hardly to be expected on such shoulders—if, in short, he has made him nearly as clever as himself. When the critics complain that the characters of a novelist are too witty, the characters of a poet too profound, one cannot but feel thankful that it is once in a while possible for such strictures to be made. The style of *Mr. Sludge* is the very acme of colloquialism. It is not “what is commonly understood by poetry,” certainly: but is it not poetry, all the same? If such a character as Sludge should be introduced into poetry at all, it is certain that no more characteristic expression could have been found for him. But should he be dealt with? Surely “*quicquid agunt homines*” has been and always will be the broad field for the poet, and not a mere section of it, the beautiful and

seemly, the graceful and refined, alone. It is the poet's business to hold the mirror up to nature, and not to cover the mirror when an ugly face comes near. Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew this: in our own age Mr. Browning knows it.

Scarcely second in importance to the dramatic group, comes the group of lyrical poems, some of which are, indeed, formally dramatic, that is, the "utterance of so many imaginary persons," but still in general tone and effect lyrical and even personal. *Abt Vogler*, for instance, and *Rabbi ben Ezra*, might no doubt be considered instances of "vicarious thinking" on behalf of the modern German composer and the mediæval Jewish philosopher. But in neither case is there any distinct dramatic intention. The one is a deep personal utterance on music, the other a philosophy of life. But before I touch on these, which, with *Prospice*, are the most important and impressive of the remaining poems, I should name the two or three lesser pieces, the exquisite and pregnant little elegy of love and mourning, *May and Death* (suggested, we are told, by the death of a relative); *A Face*, with its perfect clearness and fineness of suggestive portraiture, as lovely as the vignettes of Palma in *Sordello*, or as a real picture of the "Tuscan's early art;" the two octaves (not in the first edition) on Woolner's group of Constance and Arthur (*Deaf and Dumb*) and Sir Frederick Leighton's picture of *Eurydice and Orpheus*; and the two semi-narrative poems, *Gold Hair: a story of Pornic*, and *Apparent Failure*, the former a vivid rendering of the strange story told in Brittany of a beautiful girl-miser, the latter a record of a visit that Mr. Brown-ing paid in 1856 to the Morgue.

*Abt Vogler** ("after he has been extemporizing upon the

* The Abt or Abbé George Joseph Vogler (born at Würzburg, Bavaria, in 1749, died at Darmstadt, 1824), was a composer, professor, kapelmeister and writer on music. Among his pupils were Weber and Meyer-

musical instrument of his invention") is an utterance on music which exceeds every attempt that has ever been made in verse to set forth the secret of the most sacred and illusive of the arts. Only the wonderful lines in the *Merchant of Venice* come anywhere near it. The depth and height and splendour, the inspiration, of this incomparable poem, are as far beyond the reach of any words to praise as they are beyond the possibility of any eyes to overlook. The wonder and beauty of it grow on one, as the wonder and beauty of a sky, of the sea, of a landscape, beautiful indeed and wonderful from the first, become momentarily more evident, intense and absorbing. Life, religion and music—the *Ganzen, Guten, Schönen* of existence—are combined in threefold unity, apprehended and interpreted in their essential spirit.

"Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?
 Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!
 What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?
 Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?
 There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
 The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
 What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
 On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good, shall exist;
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
 The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
 Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
 Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

beer. The "musical instrument of his invention" was called an orchestra. "It was," says Sir G. Grove, "a very compact organ, in which four keyboards of five octaves each, and a pedal board of thirty-six keys, with swell complete, were packed into a cube of nine feet."—(See Miss Marx's "Account of Abbé Vogler," in the *Browning Society's Papers*, Part. III., p. 339).

“ And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
 For the fulness of the days ? Have we withered or agonized ?
 Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue
 thence ?
 Why rushed the discord in, but that harmony should be prized ?
 Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
 Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe :
 But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear ;
 The rest may reason and welcome : 'tis we musicians know.”

In Rabbi ben Ezra Mr. Browning has crystallized his religious philosophy into a shape of abiding beauty. It has been called, not rashly, the noblest of modern religious poems. Alike in substance and in form it belongs to the highest order of meditative poetry ; and it has an almost unique quality of grave beauty, of severe restraint, of earnest and measured enthusiasm. This is one of those poems which can never be profitably analysed or commented on : it must be read. What the *Psalm of Life* is to the people who do not think, *Rabbi ben Ezra* might and should be to those who do : a light through the darkness—a lantern of guidance and a beacon of hope—to the wanderers lost and weary in the *selva selvaggia*. It is one of those poems that mould character. I can give only one or two of its most characteristic verses.

“ Not on the vulgar mass
 Called ‘ work ’ must sentence pass,
 Things done, that took the eye and had the price ;
 O’er which, from level stand,
 The low world laid its hand,
 Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice :

“ But all, the world’s coarse thumb
 And finger failed to plumb,
 So passed in making up the main account ;
 All instincts immature,
 All purposes unsure,
 That weighed not as his work yet swelled the man’s amount :

"Thoughts hardly to be packed
 Into a narrow act,
 Fancies that broke through language and escaped ;
 All, I could never be,
 All, men ignored in me,
 This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

"So, take and use Thy work :
 Amend what flaws may lurk,
 What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim !
 My times be in Thy hand !
 Perfect the cup as planned !
 Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same !"

The emotion and the measure of *Rabbi ben Ezra* have the chastened, sweet gravity of wise old age. *Prospice* has all the impetuous blood and fierce lyric fire of militant manhood. It is a cry of passionate exultation and exaltation in the very face of death : a war-cry of triumph over the last of foes. If *Rabbi ben Ezra* has been excelled as a Song of Life, then *Prospice* may have been excelled as a Hymn of Death.

" PROSPICE.

"Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
 The mist in my face,
 When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
 I am nearing the place,
 The power of the night, the press of the storm,
 The post of the foe ;
 Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
 Yet the strong man must go :
 For the journey is done and the summit attained,
 And the barriers fall,
 Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
 The reward of it all.
 I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more
 The best and the last !
 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
 And bade me creep past.

No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold.
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest !"

Last of all comes the final word, the last summary or conclusion of the whole matter, in the threefold speech of the *Epilogue*,—a comprehensive and suggestive vision of the religious life of humanity.

17. THE RING AND THE BOOK.

[Published, in 4 vols., in 1868-9 : Vol. I., November, 1868 ; Vol. II., December, 1868 ; Vol. III., January, 1869 ; Vol. IV., February, 1869. In 12 Books : I., The Ring and the Book ; II., Half-Rome ; III., The Other Half-Rome ; IV., Tertium Quid ; V., Count Guido Franceschini ; VI., Giuseppe Caponsacchi ; VII., Pompilia ; VIII., Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Pauperum Procurator ; IX., Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, Fiscus et Rev. Cam. Apostol. Advocatus ; X., The Pope ; XI., Guido ; XII., The Book and the Ring.]

The Ring and the Book is at once the largest and the greatest of Mr. Browning's works, the culmination of his dramatic method, and the turning-point, more decisively than *Dramatis Personæ*, of his style. It consists of twelve books, the first and last being of the nature of Preface and Appendix. In form it is monodramatic, each book being a monologue. It embodies a single story, told ten times, each time from an individual standpoint, by nine different

persons (one of them speaking twice), besides a summary of the story by the poet in the first book, and some additional particulars in the last. The method thus adopted is at once absolutely original and supremely difficult. To tell the same story, without monotonous repetition, no less than ten times over, to make each telling at once the same and new, a record of the same facts but of independent impressions, to convey by means of each monologue a sense of the speaker not less vivid and lifelike than by the ordinary dramatic method, with a yet more profound measure of analytic and psychological truth, and finally to group all these figures with unerring effect of prominence and subordination, to fuse and mould all these parts into one living whole : to achieve all this is surely one of the most extraordinary feats of which we have any record in literature. As a mere *tour de force* it is unique, but this is the very least of its merits. *The Ring and the Book* (besides being the longest poetical work of the century) takes rank easily among the greatest poems in our literature : it has a wealth of spiritual insight, human science, dramatic and intellectual and moral force, a strength and grip, a subtlety, a range and variety of genius and of knowledge, without parallel save in the pages of Shakespeare. To expect that a work of such length and range should be without fault or flaw, is to expect the impossible : even Homer nods. But a momentary irritation at what may here and there seem to be either carelessness or perversity can affect no capable reader's spontaneous and abiding recognition of the supreme and transcendent worth of the work as a whole.

The story of *The Ring and the Book*, like those of so many of the greatest works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, comes to us from Italy. Unlike Shakespeare's, however, but like one at least of Webster's two masterpieces, it is no legend, but the true story of a Roman

murder-case, found (in all its main facts and outlines) in a square old yellow book, small-quarto size, part print, part manuscript, which Mr. Browning picked up for eightpence on a second-hand stall in the Piazza San Lorenzo at Florence, one day in June, 1865. The book was entitled (in Latin which Mr. Browning thus translates) :—

“A Roman murder-case :

Position of the entire criminal cause
Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
With certain Four the cut-throats in his pay,
Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death
By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,
At Rome on February Twenty Two,
Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight :
Wherein it is disputed if, and when,
Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape
The customary forfeit.”

The book proved to be one of those contemporary records of famous trials which were not uncommon in Italy, and which are said to be still frequent in Italian libraries. It contained the printed pleadings for and against the accused, the judicial sentence, and certain manuscript letters describing the efforts made on Guido's behalf and his final execution. This book (with a contemporary pamphlet which Mr. Browning afterwards met with in London) supplied the outline of the picture so gloriously painted in the great poem to which it helped to give a name.

The story itself is a tragic tale, rich in material for artistic handling, though not for the handling of every artist. But its importance is relatively inconsiderable. “I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,” says the poet, and

“thence bit by bit I dug

The ingot truth, that memorable day,
Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold,—
Yes ; but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Makes it bear hammer and be firm to file.

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more ;
To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,
As right through ring and ring runs the djereed
And binds the loose, one bar without a break."

The story, in brief, is this. Pompilia, the supposed daughter of Pietro and Violante Comparini, an aged burgher couple of Rome, has been married, at the age of thirteen, to Count Guido Franceschini, an impoverished middle-aged nobleman of Arezzo. The arrangement, in which Pompilia is, of course, quite passive, has been made with the expectation, on the part of Guido, of a large dowry ; on the part of the Comparini, of an aristocratic alliance, and a princely board at Guido's palace. No sooner has the marriage taken place than both parties find that they have been tricked. Guido, disappointed of his money, and unable to reach the pair who have deceived him, vents his spite on the innocent victim, Pompilia. At length Pompilia, knowing that she is about to become a mother, escapes from her husband, aided by a good young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, a canon of Arezzo ; and a few months afterwards, at the house of her putative parents, she gives birth to a son. A fortnight after the birth of his heir, Guido, who has been waiting till his hold on the dowry is thus secured, takes with him four cut-throats, steals by night to Rome, and kills his wife and the aged Comparini, leaving the child alive. He is captured the same night, and brought to judgment at Rome. When the poem opens, the case is being tried before the civil courts. No attempt is made to dispute the fact of Guido's actual committal of the deed ; he has been caught red-handed, and Pompilia, preserved almost by miracle, has survived her wounds long enough to tell the whole story. The sole question is, whether the act had any justification ; it being pretended by Guido that his wife had been guilty of

adultery with the priest Caponsacchi, and that his deed was a simple act of justice. He was found guilty by the legal tribunal, and condemned to death; Pompilia's innocence being confirmed beyond a doubt. Guido then appealed to the Pope, who confirmed the judicial sentence. The whole of the poem takes place between the arrest and trial of Guido and the final sentence of the Pope; at the time, that is, when the hopes and fears of the actors, and the curiosity of the spectators, would be at their highest pitch.

The first book, entitled *The Ring and the Book*, gives the facts of the story, some hint of the author's interpretation of them, and the outlines of the plan of the work. We are not permitted any of the interest of suspense. Mr. Browning tells us clearly the whole bearing and consequence of events, as well as the right and wrong of them. He has written few finer passages than the swift and fiery narrative of the story, lived through in vision on the night of his purchase of the original documents. But complete and elaborate as this is, it is merely introductory, a mere prologue before the curtain rises on the drama. First we have three representative specimens of public opinion—*Half-Rome*, *The Other Half-Rome*, and *Tertium Quid*; each speaker presenting the complete case from his own point of view. "Half-Rome" takes the side of Guido. We are allowed to see that the speaker is a jealous husband, and that his judgment is biased by an instinctive sympathy with the presumably jealous husband, Guido. "The Other Half Rome" takes the side of the wife, "little Pompilia with the patient eyes," now lying in the hospital, mortally wounded, and waiting for death. This speaker is a bachelor, probably a young man, and his judgment is swayed by the beauty and the piteousness of the dying girl. The speech of "Half-Rome," being as it is an attempt to make light of the murder, and the utterance of a somewhat ridiculous per-

sonage, is exceedingly humorous and colloquial ; that of the " Other Half-Rome " is serious, earnest, sometimes eloquent. No contrast could be more complete than that presented by these two " sample-speeches." The objects remain the same, but we see them through different ends of the telescope. Either account taken by itself is so plausible as to seem almost morally conclusive. But in both instances we have down-right apology and condemnation,—partiality bred of prejudice. *Tertium Quid* presents us with a reasoned and judicial judgment,—impartiality bred of contempt or indifference ; this being—

" What the superior social section thinks,
 In person of some man of quality
 Who,—breathing musk from lace-work and brocade,
 His solitaire amid the flow of frill,
 Powdered peruke on nose, and bag at back,
 And cane dependent from the ruffled wrist—
 Harangues in silvery and selectest phrase,
 'Neath waxlight in a glorified saloon
 Where mirrors multiply the girandole :
 Courting the approbation of no mob,
 But Eminence This and All-Illustrious That,
 Who take snuff softly, range in well-bred ring,
 Card-table-quitters for observance' sake,
 Around the argument, the rational word . . .
 How quality dissertated on the case."

"*Tertium Quid*" deals with the case very gently, mindful of his audience, to whom, at each point of the argument calling for judgment, he politely refers the matter, and passes on. He speaks in a tone of light and well-bred irony, with the aristocratic contempt for the *plebs*, the burgesses—Society's assumption of Exclusive Information. He gives the general view of things, clearly, neutrally, with no vulgar emphasis of black and white. " I simply take the facts, ask what they mean."

So far we have had rumour alone, the opinions of out-

siders ; next come the three great monologues in which the persons of the drama—Count Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia—bear witness of themselves.

"The imaginary occasion," says Mrs. Orr, "is that of Count Guido's trial, and all the depositions which were made on the previous one are transferred to this. The author has been obliged in every case to build up the character from the evidence, and to re-mould and expand the evidence in conformity with the character. The motive, feeling, and circumstance set forth by each separate speaker, are thus in some degree fictitious ; but they are always founded upon fact, and the literal fact of a vast number of details is self-evident." *

These three monologues (with the second of Guido) are by far the most important in the book.

First comes *Count Guido Franceschini*. Under torture, he has confessed to the murder of his wife. He is now permitted to defend himself before the judges.

"Soft-cushioned sits he ; yet shifts seat, shirks touch,
As, with a twitchy brow and wincing lip,
And cheek that changes to all kinds of white,
He proffers his defence, in tones subdued
Near to mock-mildness now, so mournful seems
The obtuser sense truth fails to satisfy ;
Now, moved, from pathos at the wrong endured,
To passion
Also his tongue at times is hard to curb ;
Incisive, nigh satiric bites the phrase.
.
And never once does he detach his eye
From those ranged there to slay him or to save,
But does his best man's-service for himself."

His speech is a tissue of falsehoods and prevarications : if he uses a fact, it is only to twist it into a form of self-justification. He knows it is useless to deny the murder ; his aim, then, is to explain and excuse it. Every device attainable by the instinct and the brain of hunted humanity he finds and uses. Now he slurs rapidly over an incon-

* *Handbook*, p. 93.

venient fact; now, with the frank audacity of innocence, proclaims and blazons it abroad; now he is rhetorically eloquent, now ironically pathetic; always contriving to shift the blame on to others, and to make his own course appear the only one plausible or possible—the only one possible, at least, to a high-born, law-abiding son of the Church. Every shift and twist is subtly adapted to his audience of Churchmen, and the gradation of his pleading no less subtly contrived. A keener, subtler piece of special pleading has never been written—in poetry certainly, possibly in lawyers' prose; and it is poetry of the highest order of dramatic art.

Covering a narrower range, but still more expressive and impressive within its own limits, the speech of *Giuseppe Caponsacchi*, the priest who assisted Pompilia in her flight to Rome—given now in her defence before the judges who have heard the defence of Guido—is perhaps the most passionate and thrilling piece of blank verse ever written by Mr. Browning. Indeed, I doubt if it be an exaggeration to say that such fire, such pathos, such splendour of human speech, has never been heard or seen in English verse since Shakespeare and Webster. In tone and colour the monologue is quite new, exquisitely modulated to a surprising music. The lighter passages are admirable and brilliant: the eloquent passages ~~sometimes~~ grandly conceived and expressed: but it is in those passages directly relating to Pompilia that the chief greatness of the work lies. There is in these appeals a quivering, thrilling, searching quality of fervid, pathetic directness—I can give no notion of it in words; but here are a few lines, torn roughly out of their context, which may serve in some degree to illustrate my meaning:—

“Pompilia's face, then and thus, looked on me
 The last time in this life: not one sight since,
 Never another sight to be! And yet
 I thought I had saved her. I appealed to Rome:
 It seems I simply sent her to her death.

You tell me she is dying now, or dead ;
 I cannot bring myself to quite believe
 This is a place you torture people in :
 What if this your intelligence were just
 A subtlety, an honest wile to work
 On a man at unawares ? 'Twere worthy you.
 No, Sirs, I cannot have the lady dead !
 That erect form, flashing brow, fulgurant eye,
 That voice immortal (oh, that voice of hers !)
 That vision of the pale electric sword
 Angels go armed with,—that was not the last
 O' the lady ! Come, I see through it, you find—
 Know the manœuvre ! Also herself said
 I had saved her : do you dare say she spoke false ?
 Let me see for myself if it be so !
 Though she were dying, a priest might be of use,
 The more when he's a friend too,—she called me
 Far beyond 'friend.' ”

Severed from its connection, much of the charm of the passage vanishes away—always the test of the finest dramatic work ; but enough remains to give some faint shadow of the real beauty of the work. Observe how the rhythm trembles in accord with the emotion of the speaker : now slow, solemn, sad, with something of the quiet of despair ; now strenuously self-deluding and feverishly eager : “ Let me see for myself if it be so ! ”—a line which has all the flush and gasp in it of broken sudden utterance. Some further hint of the unsurpassable quality of the monologue may be seen in that wonderful concluding passage—I can only give a part of it :—

“ Sirs, I am quiet again. You see, we are
 So very pitiable, she and I,
 Who had conceivably been otherwis
 Forget distemperature and idle heat !
 Apart from truth's sake, what's to move so much ?
 Pompilia will be presently with God ;
 I am, on earth, as good as out of it,
 A relegated priest ; when exile ends,
 I mean to do my duty and live long.

She and I are mere strangers now : but priests
 Should study passion ; how else cure mankind,
 Who come for help in passionate extremes ?
 I do but play with an imagined life.

Mere delectation, fit for a minute's dream !—
 Just as a drudging student trims his lamp,
 Opens his Plutarch, puts him in the place
 Of Roman, Grecian ; draws the patched gown close,
 Dreams, ' Thus should I fight, save or rule the world ! '—
 Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes
 To the old solitary nothingness.
 So I, from such communion pass content . . .

O great, just, good God ! Miserable me ! ”

When we have heard the impassioned defence of Capon-
 sacchi, we pass to the death-bed of *Pompilia*.

“ Then a soul sighs its lowest and its last
 After the loud ones,”

as *Pompilia* tells, to the kind ones about her, the story of her life, in a simple, childlike, dreamy, wondering way, which can be compared, so far as I know, with nothing else ever written. All the “ piercing and overpowering tenderness which glorifies,” as Mr Swinburne has said, “ the poet of *Pompilia* ” is infused into this almost faultlessly lovely poem. It is a song of serene and quiet beauty, beautiful as evening-twilight. It is, too, a splendid example of the power of imaginative sympathy. For, though it is a man who writes, we have here the whole heart of a woman—of a young and dying mother, most unhappy all the days of her life, quiet only for a space to die in—the whole heart, and the very speech and accent, as of the truest, sweetest, purest and most womanly of women. You cannot analyse the perfume of a flower, nor yet prove its beauty by displaying a petal. Still, here are two or three most tender

and touching lines. Pompilia is speaking of the birth of her babe.

“ A whole long fortnight : in a life like mine
 A fortnight filled with bliss is long and much.
 All women are not mothers of a boy,
 Though they live twice the length of my whole life,
 And, as they fancy, happily all the same.
 There I lay, then, all my great fortnight long,
 As if it would continue, broaden out
 Happily more and more, and lead to heaven :
 Christmas before me,—was not that a chance ?
 I never realized God’s birth before—
 How He grew likest God in being born.
 This time I felt like Mary, had my babe
 Lying a little on my breast like hers.”

With a beautiful and holy confidence she now “lays away her babe with God,” secure for him in the future. She forgives the husband who has slain her : “I could not love him, but his mother did.” And with her last breath she blesses the friend who has saved her :—

“ O lover of my life, O soldier-saint,
 No work begun shall ever pause for death.

.

So, let him wait God’s instant men call years ;
 Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
 Do out the duty ! Through such souls alone
 God stooping shows sufficient of His light
 For us i’ the dark to rise by. And I rise.”

After *Pompilia*, we have the pleadings and counter-pleadings of the lawyers on either side—*Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Pauperum Procurator* (the counsel for the defendant), and *Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, Fisci et Rev. Cam. Apostol. Advocatus* (public prosecutor). Arcangeli,—

" The jolly learned man of middle age,
 Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law,
 Mirthful as mighty, yet, as great hearts use,
 Despite the name and fame that tempt our flesh,
 Constant to the devotion of the hearth,
 Still captive in those dear domestic ties !"—

is represented, with fine grotesque humour, in the very act of making his speech, pre-occupied, all the while he "wheezes out law and whiffles Latin forth," with a birthday-feast in preparation for his eight-year-old son, little Giacinto, the pride of his heart. The effect is very comic, though the alternation or intermixture of lawyer's-Latin and domestic arrangements produces something which is certainly—and perhaps happily—without parallel in poetry. His defence is, and is intended to be, mere quibbling. *Causâ honoris*—for the sake of honour—is the whole pith and point of his plea : Pompilia's guilt he simply takes for granted. Bottini, the exact opposite in every way of his adversary,—

" A man of ready smile and facile tear,
 Improvised hopes, despairs at nod and beck,
 And language—ah, the gift of eloquence !
 Language that goes as easy as a glove
 O'er good and evil, smoothes both to one"—

Bottini presents us with a full-blown speech, intended to prove Pompilia's innocence, though really in every word a confession of her utter depravity. His sole purpose is to show off his cleverness, and he brings forward objections on purpose to prove how well he can turn them off ; assumes guilt for the purpose of arguing it into comparative innocence.

" Yet for the sacredness of argument, . . .
 Anything, anything to let the wheels .
 Of argument run glibly to their goal !"—

He pretends to "paint a saint," whom he can still speak

of, in tones of earnest admiration, as "wily as an eel." His implied concessions and merely parenthetical denials—his abominable insinuations and suggestions—come, evidently enough, from the instincts of a grovelling mind, literally incapable of appreciating goodness, as well as from professional irritation at one who will

" Leave a lawyer nothing to excuse,
Reason away and show his skill about."

The whole speech is a capital bit of satire and irony ; it is comically clever and delightfully exasperating.

After the lawyers have said their say, we have the final judgment, the carefully and rightly-reasoned summing-up and laying bare of the whole matter, fact and motive, in the soliloquy of *The Pope*. Guido has been tried and found guilty, but, on appeal, the case has been referred to the Pope, Innocent XII., one word of whose will save or slay. As we see him, his decision is made ; he has been studying the case from early morning, and now, at the " dim

Droop of a sombre February day,
In the plain closet where he does such work,
With, from all Peter's treasury, one stool,
One table and one lathen crucifix,"

he passes the actors of the tragedy in one last review, nerving himself to pronounce the condemnation which he feels, as judge, to be due, but which he shrinks from with the natural shrinking of an aged man about to send a strong man to death before him. Pompilia he pronounces faultless and more,—

" My rose, I gather for the breast of God ; "

Caponsacchi, not all without fault, yet a true soldier of God, prompt, for all his former seeming frivolousness, to spring forward and redress the wrong, victorious, too, over temptation. :—

" Was the trial sore ?
 Temptation sharp ? Thank God a second time !
 Why comes temptation but for man to meet
 And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
 And so be pedestalled in triumph ? Pray
 ' Lead us into no such temptation, Lord ! '
 Yea, but, O Thou, whose servants are the bold,
 Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
 Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
 That so he may do battle and have praise ! "

For Guido he can see no excuse, can find no loophole for mercy, and but little hope of penitence or salvation, and he signs the death-warrant.

" For the main criminal I have no hope
 Except in such a suddenness of fate.
 I stood at Naples once, a night so dark,
 I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
 Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all :
 But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
 Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
 Through her whole length of mountain visible :
 There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
 And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
 So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
 And Guido see, one instant, and be saved."

The whole monologue is of different order from all the others. Every one but this expresses a more or less partial and fragmentary view. *Tertium Quid* alone makes any pretence at impartiality, and his is the result of indifference, not of justice. The Pope's speech is long, slow, discursive, full of aged wisdom, dignity and nobility. The latter part of it, containing some of Mr. Browning's most characteristic philosophy, is by no means out of place, but perfectly coherent and appropriate to the character of the speaker.

Last of all comes the second and final speech of *Guido*, " the same man, another voice," as he " speaks and despairs, the last night of his life," before the Cardinal Acciaiuoli and

Abate Panciaticchi, two old friends, who have come to obtain his confession, absolve him, and accompany him to the scaffold :—

“The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,
That pried and tried and trod so gingerly
Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth join ;
Then you know how the bristling fury foams.
They listen, this wrapped in his folds of red,
While his feet fumble for the filth below ;
The other, as beseems a stouter heart,
Working his best with beads and cross to ban
The enemy that comes in like a flood
Spite of the standard set up, verily
And in no trope at all, against him there :
For at the prison-gate, just a few steps
Outside, already, in the doubtful dawn,
Thither, from this side and from that, slow sweep
And settle down in silence solidly,
Crow-wise, the frightful Brotherhood of Death.”

We have here the completed portrait of Guido, a portrait perhaps unsurpassed as a whole by any other of its author's. In his first speech he fought warily, and with delicate skill of fence, for life. Here, hopeless, but impelled by the biting frenzy of despair, he pours out on his awe-stricken listeners a headlong tide of entreaty, defiance, ghastly and anguished humour, flattery, satire, raving and foaming blasphemy and impenitence. His desperate venom and blasphemous raillery is part despair, part calculated horror. In his last revolt against death and all his foes, he snatches at any weapon—even truth—that may serve his purpose and gain a reprieve :—

“I thought you would not slay impenitence,
But teased, from men you slew, contrition first,—
I thought you had a conscience . . .
Would you send
A soul straight to perdition, dying frank
An atheist ?”

How much of truth there is in it all we need not attempt to decide. It is not likely that Guido could pretend to be much worse than he really was, though he unquestionably heightens the key of his crime, working up to a pitch of splendid ferocity almost sublime, from a malevolence rather mean than manly. When at the last, struck suddenly, at the chill shadow of impending death, from his pretence of defiant courage, he hurls down at a blow the whole structure of close-compacted lies, and reveals in a breath his own malignant cowardice and the innocence of his murdered wife,—is it with a touch of remorse, of saving penitence?—this superb climax, which rounds into a ring the fine gold of the master-work of our day, falls with an effect hardly to be equalled in dramatic poetry.

“Nor is it in me to unhate my hates,—
 I use up my last strength to strike once more
 Old Pietro in the wine-house-gossip-face,
 To trample underfoot the whine and wile
 Of beast Violante,—and I grow one gorge
 To loathingly reject Pompilia’s pale
 Poison my hasty hunger took for food.
 A strong tree wants no wreaths about its trunk,
 No cloying cups, no sickly sweet of scent,
 But sustenance at root, a bucketful.
 How else lived that Athenian who died so,
 Drinking hot bull’s blood, fit for men like me?
 I lived and died a man, and take man’s chance,
 Honest and bold : right will be done to such.

Who are these you have let descend my stair?
 Ha, their accursed psalm ! Lights at the sill !
 Is it ‘Open’ they dare bid you ? Treachery !
 Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while
 Out of the world of words I had to say ?
 Not one word ! All was folly—I laughed and mocked !
 Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
 Is—save me notwithstanding ! Life is all !
 I was just stark mad,—let the madman live
 Pressed by as many chains as you please pile !

Don't open ! Hold me from them ! I am yours,
 I am the Granduke's,—no, I am the Pope's !
 Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .
 Pompilia, will you let them murder me ? ”

Last of all comes the Epilogue, entitled *The Book and the Ring*, giving an account of Count Guido's execution, in the form of contemporary letters, real and imaginary ; with an extract from the Augustinian's sermon on Pompilia, and other documents needed to wind off the threads of the story.

In the fragmentary account which I have been obliged to give of the separate sections, I fear there has been some injustice done to the absolute unity of the work as a whole. Each monologue contains a highly-finished portrait of the character whose name it bears, but these several portraits, far from being disconnected or independent, are linked together in as close an interdependence as the personages of a regularly-constructed drama. The effect of the reiterated story, told in some new fashion by each new teller of it, has been compared with that of a great fugue, weaving up, with the threads of its crossing and re-crossing voices, a single web of harmony. The “theme” is Pompilia ; around her the whole action circles. The same sweet rectitude and purity of her nature served to call out the latent malignity of Guido and the slumbering chivalry of Caponsacchi. Without her, the one might have remained a “*petit maître* priestling,” the other, a simply soured, cross-grained, impetuous country squire : Rome would have had no tragedy to talk about, nor we this book to read. It is in Pompilia that all the threads of action meet : she is the heroine, as neither Guido nor Caponsacchi can be styled the hero. But in her own person she speaks less, far less, than these others. This is partly from her age, circumstances and character, but very much because her nature is simpler, purer and more unshadowed, than theirs. Guido,

the most formidable and active character, has very properly the largest amount of space for the exhibition of his warped and complex nature and career; and the monologues devoted to him are in sheer depth of human science—in sheer realism of artistic delineation—the most marvellous of all. “Every nerve of the mind is touched by the patient scalpel every vein and joint of the subtle and intricate spirit divided and laid bare. A close and dumb soul compelled into speech by mere struggle and stress of things labours in literal translation and accurate agony at the lips of Guido. This scientific veracity which unbuilds and rebuilds the whole structure of spirit, thought by thought and touch by touch, until the final splendour of solution is achieved, and the consummate labour made perfect from key-stone to coping-stone, is so triumphant a thing that on its own ground it can be matched by no poet.”*

One other point it seems needful to emphasize, the quality of the style and verse. It has become one of those unreasoning catch-words which gain weight with every idle repetition, to say that the great fault of the work lies in the similarity of the language—known to the smaller wits as “Browningese”—employed without distinction by each of the *dramatis personæ*. The simple fact is, that a greater variety of style, a more cunning adjustment of language and of rhythm to the requirements of every speaker, is scarcely to be found. From the general construction of the rhythm to the mere similes and figures of speech employed in passing, each monologue is singularly and absolutely individual. The broad outlines of his style every poet does and must preserve always, even in dramatic work; and even Shakespeare has his mannerisms.

The Ring and the Book was the first large work to which the poet addressed himself after the death of his wife, and her memory holds in it a double shrine—at the opening an

* Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*, p. 220.

invocation, at the close a dedication. I quote the former, a sacred passage of which nothing need be said save that it is worthy of the dead and of the living.

“O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird
 And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
 Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
 Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
 And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
 Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
 When the first summons from the darkling earth
 Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
 And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
 To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
 This is the same voice : can thy soul know change?
 Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help !
 Never may I commence my song, my due
 To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
 Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
 That still, despite the distance and the dark,
 What was, again may be ; some interchange
 Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
 Some benediction anciently thy smile :
 —Never conclude, but raising hand and head
 Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
 For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
 Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
 In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
 Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
 Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall !”

18. BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE : including a Transcript from Euripides.

[Published in August, 1871. Dedication : “To the Countess Cowper.—If I mention the simple truth : that this poem absolutely owes its existence to you,—who not only suggested, but imposed on me as a task, what has proved the most delightful of May-month amusements—I shall seem honest, indeed, but hardly prudent ; for, how good and beautiful ought such a poem to be !—Euripides might fear little ; but I, also, have an

interest in the performance : and what wonder if I beg you to suffer that it make, in another and far easier sense, its nearest possible approach to those Greek qualities of goodness and beauty, by laying itself gratefully at your feet ?— R. B. London, July 23, 1871.”]

THE episode which supplies the title of *Balaustion's Adventure* was suggested by the familiar story told by Plutarch in his life of Nicias : that after the ruin of the Sicilian expedition, those of the Athenian captives who could repeat any poetry of Euripides were set at liberty, or treated with consideration, by the Syracusans. In Mr. Browning's poem, Balaustion tells her four girl-friends the story of her “adventure” at Syracuse, where, shortly before, she had saved her own life and the lives of a ship's-company of her friends by reciting the play of *Alkestis* to the Euripides-loving townfolk. After a brief reminiscence of the adventure, which has gained her—besides life, and much fame, and the regard of Euripides—a lover whom she is shortly to marry, she repeats, for her friends, the whole play, adding, as she speaks the words of Euripides, such other words of her own as may serve to explain or help to realise the conception of the poet. In other words, we have a transcript or re-telling in monologue of the whole play, interspersed with illustrative comments ; and after this is completed Balaustion again takes up the tale, presents us with a new version of the story of *Alkestis*, refers by anticipation to a poem of Mrs. Browning and a picture of Sir Frederick Leighton, and ends with the burst of melodious enthusiasm :—

“ And all came—glory of the golden verse,
And passion of the picture, and that fine
Frank outgush of the human gratitude
Which saved our ship and me, in Syracuse,—
Ay, and the tear or two which slipt perhaps
Away from you, friends, while I told my tale,
—It all came of the play which gained no prize !
Why crown whom Zeus has crowned in soul before ? ”

It will thus be seen that the "transcript from Euripides" is the real occasion of the poem, Balaustion's adventure, though graphically described, and even Balaustion herself, though beautifully and vividly brought before us, being of secondary importance. The "adventure," as it has been said, is the amber in which Mr. Browning has embalmed the *Alkestis*. The play itself is rendered in a manner absolutely unique: we have more than a translation—a revelation. It is conceived in the spirit of the motto taken from Mrs. Browning's *Wine of Cyprus*:—

"Our Euripides, the human,
With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touches of things common
Till they rose to touch the spheres."

Mr. Browning has no sympathy with those who impute to Euripides a sophistic rather than a pathetic intention; and it is conceivable that the "task" which Lady Cowper imposed upon the poet was to show, by some such method of translation and interpretation, the warm humanity, deep pathos, right construction and genuine truth to nature of the drama. With this end in view Mr. Browning has woven the thread of the play into a sort of connected narrative, translating, with almost uniform literalness of language, the whole of the play as it was written by Euripides, but connecting it by comments, explanations, hints and suggestions; analyzing whatever may seem not easily to be apprehended, or not unlikely to be misapprehended; bringing out by a touch or a word some delicate shade of meaning, some subtle fineness of idea or intention.* It would be difficult

* Note, for instance, the admirable exposition and defence of the famous and ill-famed altercation between Pheres and Admetos—one of the keenest bits of explanatory analysis in Mr. Browning's works. Or observe how beautifully human the dying Alkestis becomes under his illuminating pencil; how human too, and strong, and splendid, the jovial-spoken Herakles.

to over-estimate the service done in this way both to Euripides and to students of Euripides. A more creative piece of criticism can hardly be found—not in poetry merely—that goes without saying—but even in prose. Perhaps it shares in some degree the splendid fault of creative criticism by occasionally lending, not finding, the noble qualities which we are certainly made to see in the work itself.

It is generally acknowledged that the translation, *as a translation*, is in every way excellent and admirable. Owing to the peculiar scheme on which it is constructed, the choruses, etc., could not be rendered into lyric verse; while, again for the same reason, a few passages here and there are omitted, or only indicated by a word or so in passing. The omitted passages are very few in number; but it is not always easy to see why they should have been omitted.* Mr. Browning's canon of translation is "to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language," and well indeed has he observed his rule. Notwithstanding the greater difficulty of the metrical form, and the far greater temptation to "brighten up" a version by the use of paraphrastic but sonorous effects, it is improbable that any prose translation could be made so unexceptionally faithful. And not merely is Mr. Browning literal in the sense of following the original word for word, he gives the exact root-meaning of words which a literal translator would consider himself justified in taking in their general sense. Occasionally a literality of this sort is less easily intelligible to the general reader than the more obvious word would have been; but, save in a very few instances, the whole translation is not less clear and forcible than it is exact.

* The two speeches of Eumelos, not without a note of pathos, are scarcely represented by—

" The children's tears ran fast
Bidding their father note the eye-lids' stare,
Hands'-droop, each dreadful circumstance of death."

Mr. Browning has unquestionably enriched our language with a new poem in this literal, yet glorified and vivified, translation of a masterpiece of Greek tragedy.

The blank verse of *Balaustion's Adventure* is somewhat different from that of its predecessor, *The Ring and the Book*: to my own ear, at least, it is by no means so original or so fine. It is more restrained, indeed—a merit, very often, in verse. But Mr. Browning seems to be himself working under a sort of restraint, or perhaps upon a theory of the sort of versification appropriate to classical themes. Something of frank vigour, something of flexibility and natural expressiveness, is lost, but, on the other hand, there is often a rich colour in the verse, a lingering perfume and sweetness in the melody, which has a new and exquisite charm, all its own.

19. PRINCE HOHENSTIEL-SCHWANGAU, SAVIOUR OF SOCIETY.

[Published in December, 1871.]

*Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau** is a blank verse monologue, supposed to be spoken, in a musing day-dream, by Louis Napoleon, while Emperor of the French, and calling himself, to the delight of ironical echoes, the "Saviour of Society." The work is equally distant in spirit from the branding satire and righteous wrath of Victor Hugo's *Châtiments* and *Napoléon le Petit*, and from Lord Beaconsfield's *couleur de rose* portrait, in *Endymion*, of the nominally pseudonymous Prince Florestan. It is neither a denunciation nor a eulogy, nor yet altogether an impartial delineation. It is an "apology," with much the same object as those of Bishop Blougram or Mr. Sludge, the Medium,—“by no means to prove black white or white black, or to make the worse appear the better reason, but to bring a seeming monster and perplexing

* The name *Hohenstiel-Schwangau* is formed from Hohen Schwangau, one of the castles of the late king of Bavaria.

anomaly under the common laws of nature, by showing how it has grown to be what it is, and how it can with more or less of self-illusion reconcile itself to itself."*

The poem is very hard reading, perhaps as a whole about the hardest intellectual exercise in Mr. Browning's works, but this arises not so much from the obscurity of its ideas and phrases as from the peculiar complexity of its structure. To apprehend it we must put ourselves at a certain standpoint, which is not easy to attain. The monologue as a whole represents, as we only learn at the end, not a direct speech to a real person in England, but a mere musing over a cigar in the palace in France. It is divided into two distinct sections, which need to be kept clearly apart in the mind. The first section, up to p. 84, is a direct self-apology. Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau puts forward what he represents as his theory of practice. It is founded on the principle of *laissez-faire*, and resolves itself into conformity—concurrence with things as they are, with society as it is. He finds existing institutions, not indeed perfect, but sufficiently good for practical purposes; and he conceives his mission to be that of a builder on existing foundations—that of a social conservator, not of a social reformer: "to do the best with the least change possible." On his own showing, he has had this single aim in view from first to last, and on this ground—that of expediency—he explains and defends every act of his tortuous and vacillating policy. He has had his ambitions and ideals—of giving freedom to Italy, for example—but he has set them aside in the interests of his own people and for what he holds to be their more immediate needs. So far the direct apology. He next proceeds to show what he might have done, but did not, the ideal course, as it is held; commenting the while, as "Sagacity," upon the imaginary new version of

James Thomson, "The Ring and the Book," *Gentleman's Magazine*, December, 1881.

his career. His comments represent his real conduct, and they are such as he assumes would naturally be made on the "ideal" course by the very critics who have censured his actual temporising policy. The final pages contain an involuntary confession that, even in his own eyes, Prince Hohenstiel is not quite satisfied with either his conduct or his defence of it.

To separate the truth from the falsehood in this dramatic monologue has not been Mr. Browning's intention, and it need not be ours. It may be repeated that Mr. Browning is no apologist for Louis Napoleon : he simply calls him to the front, and, standing aside, allows him to speak for himself. In his speech under these circumstances we find just as much truth entangled with just as much sophistry as we might reasonably expect. Here, we get what seems the genuine truth ; there, in what appears to the speaker a satisfactory defence, we see that he is simply exposing his own moral defect ; again, like Bishop Blougram, he "says true things, but calls them by wrong names." Passages of the last kind are very frequent ; are, indeed, to be found everywhere throughout the poem ; and it is in these that Mr. Browning unites most cleverly the vicarious thinking due to his dramatic subject, and the good honest thought which we never fail to find dominant in his most exceptional work. The Prince gives utterance to a great deal of very true and very admirable good sense ; we are at liberty to think him insincere in his application of it, but an axiom remains true, even if it be wrongly applied.

The versification of the poem is everywhere vigorous, and often fine ; perhaps the finest passage it contains is that referring to Louis Napoleon's abortive dreams on behalf of Italy.

" Ay, still my fragments wander, music-fraught,
Sighs of the soul, mine once, mine now, and mine
For ever ! Crumbled arch, crushed aqueduct,
Alive with tremors in the shaggy growth

Of wild-wood, crevice-sown, that triumphs there
 Imparting exultation to the hills !
 Sweep of the swathe when only the winds walk
 And waft my words above the grassy sea
 Under the blinding blue that basks o'er Rome,—
 Hear ye not still—' Be Italy again ?'
 And ye, what strikes the panic to your heart ?
 Decrepit council-chambers,—where some lamp
 Drives the unbroken black three paces off
 From where the greybeards huddle in debate,
 Dim crows and capes, and midmost glimmers one
 Like tarnished gold, and what they say is doubt,
 And what they think is fear, and what suspends
 The breath in them is not the plaster-patch
 Time disengages from the painted wall
 Where Rafael moulderingly bids adieu,
 Nor tick of the insect turning tapestry
 To dust, which a queen's finger traced of old ;
 But some word, resonant, redoubtable,
 Of who once felt upon his head a hand
 Whereof the head now apprehends his foot."

20. FIFINE AT THE FAIR.

[Published in 1872.]

Fifine at the Fair is a monologue at once dramatic and philosophical. Its arguments, like those of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, are part truth, part sophistry. The poem is prefaced by a motto from Molière's *Don Juan*, in which Donna Elvira, the wronged wife of the libertine-hero, suggests to her husband, with a bitter irony, the defence he ought to make for himself. Don Juan did not take the hint. Mr. Browning has done so. The genesis of the poem and the special form it has assumed are further explained by the following passage from Mrs. Orr :—

" Mr. Browning was, with his family, at Pornic, many years ago, and there saw the gypsy who is the original of *Fifine*. His fancy was evidently set roaming by her audacity, her strength—the contrast which

she presented to the more spiritual types of womanhood ; and this contrast eventually found expression in a poetic theory of life, in which these opposite types and their corresponding modes of attraction became the necessary complement of each other. As he laid down the theory, Mr. Browning would be speaking in his own person. But he would turn into someone else in the act of working it out—for it insensibly carried with it a plea for yielding to those opposite attractions, not only successively, but at the same time ; and a modified Don Juan would grow up under his pen." *

This modified Don Juan is the spokesman of the poem : not the "splendid devil" of the old legends, but a modern gentleman, living at Pornic, a refined, cultured, musical, artistic and philosophical person, "of high attainments, lofty aspirations, strong emotions, and capricious will." Strolling through the fair with his wife, he expatiates on the charm of a Bohemian existence, and, more particularly on the charms of one Fifine, a rope-dancer, whose performance he has witnessed. Urged by the troubled look of his wife, he launches forth into an elaborate defence of inconstancy in love, and consequently of the character of his admiration for Fifine.

He starts by arguing :—

" That bodies show me minds,
That, through the outward sign, the inward grace allures,
And sparks from heaven transpierce earth's coarsest covertures,—
All by demonstrating the value of Fifine ! "

He then applies his method to the whole of earthly life, finally resolving it into the principle :—

" All's change, but permanence as well.

.
Truth inside, and outside, truth also ; and between
Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.
The individual soul works through the shows of sense,

(Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)
 Up to an outer soul as individual too ;
 And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,
 And reach at length ' God, man, or both together mixed.' "

Last of all, just as his speculations have come to an end in an earnest profession of entire love to his wife, and they pause for a moment on the threshold of the villa, he receives a note from Fifine

" Oh, threaten no farewell ! five minutes shall suffice
 To clear the matter up. I go, and in a trice
 Return ; five minutes past, expect me ! If in vain—
 Why, slip from flesh and blood, and play the ghost again ! "

He exceeds the allotted five minutes. Elvire takes him at his word ; and, as we seem to be told in the epilogue, husband and wife are reconciled only in death.

Such is the barest outline of the structure and purport of the poem. But no outline can convey much notion of the wide range, profound significance and infinite ingenuity of the arguments ; of the splendour and vigour of the poetry ; or of the subtle consistency and exquisite truth of the character-painting. Small in amount as is this last in proportion to the philosophy, it is of very notable kind and quality. Not only the speaker, but Fifine, and still more Elvire, are each quickened into life by most graphic and delicate touches. If we except Lucrezia in *Andrea del Sarto*, in no other monologue is the presence and personality of the silent or seldom-speaking listener so vividly evident. We see the wronged wife Elvire, we know her, and we trace the very progress of her moods, the very changes in her face, as she listens to the fluent talk of her husband. Don Juan (if we may so call him) is a distinct addition to Mr. Browning's portrait-gallery. Let no one suppose him a mere mouthpiece for dialectical disquisitions. He is this certainly, but his utterances are tinged with individual colour.

This fact, which from the artistic point of view is an inestimable advantage, is apt to prove, as in the case of Prince Hohenstiel, somewhat of a practical difficulty. "The clearest way of showing where he uses (1) Truth, (2) Sophism, (3) a mixture of both—is to say that wherever he speaks of Fifine (whether as type or not) in relation to himself and his own desire for truth, or right living with his wife, he is sophistical; wherever he speaks directly of his wife's value to him he speaks truth with an alloy of sophism; and wherever he speaks impersonally he speaks the truth."* Keeping this in mind, we can easily separate the grain from the chaff; and the grain is emphatically worth storing. Perhaps no poem of Mr. Browning's contains so much deep and acute comment on life and conduct: few, such superabounding wealth of thought and imagery. Mr. Browning is famed for his elaborate and original similes; but I doubt if he has conceived any with more originality, or worked them out with richer elaboration, than those of the Swimmer, of the Carnival, of the Druid Monument, of Fifine herself. Nor has he often written finer poetry than some of the more passionate or imaginative passages of the poem. The following lines, describing an imaginary face representing Horror, have all the vivid sharpness of an actual vision or revelation:—

" Observe how brow recedes,
Head shudders back on spine, as if one haled the hair,
Would have the full-face-front what pin-point eye's sharp stare
Announces; mouth agape to drink the flowing fate,
While chin protrudes to meet the burst o' the wave: clate
Almost, spurred on to brave necessity, expend
All life left, in one flash, as fire does at its end."

Just as good, in a very different style, is this quaint and quiet little bit of landscape:—

* J. T. Nettleship on "Fifine at the Fair" (*Browning Society's Papers*, Part II., p. 223). Mr. Nettleship's elaborate analysis of the poem is a most useful, helpful and admirable piece of work.

“ For, arm in arm, we two have reached, nay, passed, you see,
 The village-precinct ; sun sets mild on Saint-Marie—
 We only catch the spire, and yet I seem to know
 What’s hid i’ the turn o’ the hill : how all the graves must glow
 Soberly, as each warms its little iron cross,
 Flourished about with gold, and graced (if private loss
 Be fresh) with stiff rope-wreath of yellow, crisp bead-blooms
 Which tempt down birds to pay their supper, mid the tombs,
 With prattle good as song, amuse the dead awhile,
 If couched they hear beneath the matted camomile.”

The poem is written in Alexandrine couplets, and is, I believe, the only English poem of any length written in this metre since Drayton's *Polyolbion*. Mr. Browning's metre has scarcely the flexibility of the best French verse, but he allows himself occasionally two licences not used in French : (1) the addition of an unaccented syllable at the end of the first half of the verse, as :—

“ ’Twas not for every Gawain to gaze upon the Grail ! ”—

(2) the addition of two syllables—an extra foot—with a view to vary the monotony :—

“ What good were else i’ the drum and fife ? O pleasant land of France ! ”

21. RED COTTON NIGHT-CAP COUNTRY ; OR, TURF AND TOWERS.

[Published in 1873.]

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is a drama of real life, true in all its facts, and studied at the place where it had occurred a few years before—St. Aubin, in Normandy (the St. Rambert of the poem). It is the story of the life of Antoine Mellerio, the Paris jeweller, whose tragic death occurred at St. Aubin on the 13th April, 1870. A suit concerning his will, decided only in the summer of 1872,

supplied Mr. Browning with the materials of his tragedy. In the first proof of the poem the real names of persons and places were given; but they were changed before publication, and are now in every case fictitious. The second edition of Mrs. Orr's *Handbook* contains a list of the real names, which I subjoin.*

The book is dedicated to Miss Thackeray (Mrs. Richmond Ritchie), and the whole story is supposed to be told to her (as in substance it was) by Mr. Browning, who has thus given to the poem a tone of pleasant colloquialism. Told as it is, it becomes in part a dramatic monologue of which the *dramatis persona* is Robert Browning. It is full of quiet, sometimes grim, humour; of picturesque and witty touches; of delicate spontaneous epigram; of pungency and irony. Its manner—the humorous telling of a tragic tale—is a little in the mode of Carlyle. In such a setting

* "Page 2. *The Firm Miranda*—Mellerio Brothers. Page 4. *St. Rambert*—St. Aubin; *Joyeux, Joyous Gard*—Lion, Lionesse. Page 6. *Vire*—Caen. Page 25. *St. Rambertese*—St. Aubinese. Page 29. *Londres*—Douvres; *London*—Dover; *La Roche*—Courcelle; *Montieu*—Bernières; *Villeneuve*—Langrune; *Pons*—Luc; *La Ravissante*—La Délivrande. Page 33. *Raimbault*—Bayeux. Page 34. *Morillon*—Hugonin; *Alrecourt*—Bonnechose; *Miranda*—Mellerio. Page 35. *New York*—Madrid. Page 41. *Clairvaux*—Tailleville. Page 42. *Madrilene*—Turinese. Page 43. *Gonthier*—Bény; *Rousseau*—Voltaire; *Léonce*—Antoine. Page 52. *Of "Firm Miranda, London and New York"*—"Mellerio Brothers"—Meller, people say. Page 79. *Rare Vissante*—Del Yvrande; *Aldabert*—Regnobeit. Page 80. *Eldobert*—Ragnebert; *Mailleville*—Beaudoin. Page 81. *Chaumont*—Quelen; *Vertgalant*—Talleyrand. Page 89. *Ravisantish*—Délivrandish. Page 101. *Clara de Millefleurs*—Anna de Beaupré; *Coliseum Street*—Miromesnil Street. Page 110. *Steiner*—Mayer; *Commerce*—Larocq; *Sierck*—Metz. Page 111. *Muhlhausen*—Debacker. Page 112. *Carlino Centofanti*—Miranda di Mongino. Page 121. *Portugal*—Italy. Page 125. "Gustave"—"Alfred." Page 135. *Vaillant*—Mériel. Page 149. *Thirty-three*—Twenty-five. 152. *Beaumont*—Pasquier. Page 167. *Sceaux*—Garges. Page 203. *Luc de la Maison Rouge*—Jean de la Becquetière; *Claise*—Vire; *Maude*—Anne. Page 204. *Dionysius*—Eliezer; *Scolastica*—Elizabeth. Page 214. *Twentieth*—Thirteenth. Page 241. *Fricquot*—Picot."—Mrs. Orr's *Handbook*, Second Edition, pp. 261-2.

the tragic episodes—sometimes well-nigh heroic, sometimes almost grotesque—have all the impressiveness of contrast.

The story itself, in the main, is a sordid enough tragedy : like several of Mr. Browning's later books, it is a study in evil. The two characters who fill the stage of this little history are tragic comedians ; they, too, are "real creatures, exquisitely fantastical, strangely exposed to the world by a lurid catastrophe, who teach us that fiction, if it can imagine events and persons more agreeable to the taste it has educated, can read us no such furrowing lesson in life." The character of Miranda—the sinner who would reconcile sin with salvation—is drawn with special subtlety—analysed, dissected rather, with the unerring scalpel of the experienced operator. Miranda is swayed through life by two opposing tendencies, for he is of mixed Castilian and French blood. He is mastered at once by two passions, earthly and religious—illicit love and Catholic devotion : he cannot let go the one and he will not let go the other ; he would enjoy himself on the "Turf" without abandoning the shelter of the "Towers." His life is spent in trying to effect a compromise between the two antagonistic powers which finally pull down his house of life. Clara, his mistress-wife, is a mirror of himself ; she humours him, manages him, perhaps on his own lines of inclination.

"'But—loved him?' Friend, I do not praise her love !
True love works never for the loved one so,
Nor spares skin-surface, smoothening truth away.
Love bids touch truth, endure truth, and embrace
Truth, though, embracing truth, love crush itself.
'Worship not me, but God !' the angels urge !"

This man and woman are analysed with exquisite skill ; but they are not in the strict sense inventions, creations : we understand rather than see them. Only towards the end, where the facts leave freer play for the poetic impulse, do they rise into sharp vividness of dramatic life and speech.

Nothing in the poem equals in intensity the great soliloquy of Miranda before his strange and suicidal leap, and the speech of Clara to the "Cousinry." Here we pass at a bound from chronicling to creation; and however splendid the chronicle, this is a great step. As a narrative, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* cannot easily be surpassed, of its kind, in verse. It has all the interest of a novel, with the concentration and higher pitch of poetry. Less ingenious and philosophical than *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* and *Fifine at the Fair*, it is far more intimately human, more closely concerned with "man's thoughts and loves and hates," with the manifestations of his eager and uneasy spirit, in strange shapes, on miry roads, in dubious twilight. Of all Mr. Browning's works it is perhaps the easiest to read; no tale could be more straightforward, no language more lucid, no verse more free from harshness or irregularity. The versification, indeed, is exceptionally smooth and measured, seldom rising into strong passion, but never running into volubility. Here and there are short passages, which I can scarcely detach for quotation, with a singular charm of vague remote music. The final summary of Clara and Miranda—excellent and convenient alike—may be severed without much damage from the context.

"Clara, I hold the happier specimen,—
 It may be, through that artist-preference
 For work complete, inferiorly proposed,
 To incompletion, though it aim aright.
 Morally, no! Aspire, break bounds! I say,
 Endeavour to be good, and better still,
 And best! Success is nought, endeavour's all.
 But intellect adjusts the means to ends,
 Tries the low thing, and leaves it done, at least;
 No prejudice to high thing, intellect
 Would do and will do, only give the means.
 Miranda, in my picture-gallery,
 Presents a Blake; be Clara—Meissonnier!

Merely considered so, by artist, mind !
 For, break through Art and rise to poetry,
 Bring Art to tremble nearer, touch enough
 The verge of vastness to inform our soul
 What orb makes transit through the dark above,
 And there's the triumph !—there the incomplete,
 More than completion, matches the immense,—
 Then, Michelagnolo against the world !”

22. ARISTOPHANES' APOLOGY : including a Transcript from Euripides ; being the Last Adventure of Balaustion.

[Published in April, 1875.]

Aristophanes' Apology, as its sub-title indicates, is a kind of sequel to *Balaustion's Adventure*. It is the record, in Balaustion's words, of an adventure which happened to her after her marriage with Euthukles. On the day when the news of Euripides' death reached Athens, as Balaustion and her husband were sitting at home, toward nightfall, Aristophanes, coming home with his revellers from the banquet which followed his triumph in the play of *Thesmophoriazousai*, burst in upon them.

“ There stood in person Aristophanes,
 And no ignoble presence ! On the bulge
 Of the clear baldness,—all his head one brow,—
 True, the veins swelled, blue net-work, and there surged
 A red from cheek to temple,—then retired
 As if the dark-leaved chaplet damped a flame,—
 Was never nursed by temperance or health.
 But huge the eyeballs rolled black native fire,
 Imperiously triumphant : nostrils wide
 Waited their incense ; while the pursed mouth's pout
 Aggressive, while the beak supreme above,
 While the head, face, nay, pillared throat thrown back,
 Beard whitening under like a vinous foam,
 These made a glory, of such insolence—
 I thought,—such domineering deity
 Hephaistos might have carved to cut the brine

For his gay brother's prow, imbrue that path
Which, purpling, recognized the conqueror.
Impudent and majestic : drunk, perhaps,
But that's religion ; sense too plainly snuffed :
Still, sensuality was grown a rite."

He, too, has just heard of Euripides' death, and an impulse, part sympathy, part mockery, has brought him to the "house friendly to Euripides." The revellers retire abashed before Balaustion ; he alone remains. From the extraordinary and only too natural gabble and garbage of his opening words, he quickly passes to a more or less serious explanation and defence of his conduct toward the dead poet,—an exposition, neither more nor less, of his aims and doings as a writer of comedy. When his "apology" is ended, Balaustion replies, censuring him pretty severely, making adroit use of the licence of a "stranger" and a woman, and defending Euripides against him. For a further—and the best—defence, she reads the whole of the *Herakles*, which Mr. Browning here translates. Aristophanes, naturally, is not convinced ; impressed he must have been, to have borne so long a reading without demur : he flings them a snatch of song, finding in his impromptu a hint for a new play—the *Frogs*,—and is gone. And now, a year after, as the couple return to Rhodes from a disgraced and dismantled Athens, Balaustion dictates to Euthukles her recollection of the "adventure," for the double purpose of putting the past events on record, and of eluding the urgency of the present sorrow.

It will thus be seen that the book consists of two distinct parts. There is, first, the apology of Aristophanes, second, the translation of the play of Euripides. *Herakles*—or, as it is more generally known, *Hercules Furens*—is rendered completely and consecutively, in blank verse and varied choric measures. It is not, as was the case with *Alkestis*, worked into the body of the poem : not welded,

but inserted. We have thus, while losing the commentary, the advantage of a detached transcript, with a lyrical rendering of the lyric parts of the play. These are given with a constant vigour and closeness, often with a rare beauty (as in the famous "Ode bewailing Age," and that other on the labours of Herakles). Precisely the same characteristics that were found in the translation of the *Alkestis* are here everywhere evident, and all that I said on the former, considered apart from its setting, may be applied to the latter. We have the same literalness (again with a few apparent exceptions), the same insistence on the root-meaning of words, the same graphic force and vivifying touch, the same general clearness and charm.

The original part of the book is of far closer texture and more remarkable order than "the amber which embalms *Alkestis*,"—the first adventure of Balaustion; but it is also less emotional and charming and popular. It is nothing less than a resuscitation of the old controversy between Aristophanes and Euripides; a resurrection, not only of the controversy, but of the combatants. "Local colour" is laid on with an unsparing hand, though it cannot be said that the atmosphere is really Greek. Hardly a line, never a page, without an allusion to something recondite—Athenian customs, Greek names, the plays of Euripides, above all, the plays of Aristophanes. "Every line of the poem," it has been truly said, "shows Mr. Browning as soaked and steeped in the comedies as was Bunyan in his Bible." The poem needs, in no ordinary degree, copious annotations. The point and progress of the argument are as clear as daylight, the language is in itself perfectly luminous, but many of the allusions must be, except to a very few, indistinct if not dark. Some elucidation is given in Mrs. Orr's *Hand-book*; but very much more is wanted.

Mr. Browning's attitude toward the controversy—as champion of Euripides—is distinctly shown, not merely in

Balaustion's reasoned statement and defence, but in the whole conduct of the piece. Aristophanes, though on his own defence, is set in a decidedly unfavourable light; and no one, judging from Mr. Browning's work, can doubt as to his opinion of the relative qualities of the two great poets. It is possible even to say there is a partiality in the presentment. But it must be remembered on the other side that Mr. Browning is not concerned simply with the question of art, but with the whole bearings, artistic and ethical, of the contest; and it must be remembered that the aim of Comedy is intrinsically lower and more limited than that of Tragedy, that it is destructive, disintegrating, negative, concerned with smaller issues and more temporary questions; and that Euripides may reasonably be held a better teacher, a keener reader of the riddle of Life, than his mighty assailant. This is how Aristophanes has been described, by one who should know:—

“He is an aggregate of many men, all of a certain greatness. We may build up a conception of his powers if we mount Rabelais upon Hudibras, lift him with the songfulness of Shelley, give him a vein of Heinrich Heine, and cover him with the mantle of the Anti-Jacobin, adding (that there may be some Irish in him) a dash of Grattan, before he is in motion.” *

Now the “Titanic pamphleteer” is more recognisable in Mr. Browning's most vivid portrait than the “lyric poet of aerial delicacy” who in some strange fashion, beyond his own wildest metamorphoses, distracted and idealised the otherwise congruous figure. Not that this is overlooked or forgotten: it is brought out admirably in several places, notably in the fine song put into the mouth of Aristophanes at the close; but it is scarcely so prominent as lovers of him could desire. It is possible, too, that Mr. Browning somewhat over-accentuates his earnestness—not his fundamental earnestness, which no one denies, but the extent

* George Meredith, *On the Idea of Comedy*.

to which he remembered and exhibited it. "My soul bade fight": yes, but "laugh," too, and laugh for laughter's as well as fight for principle's sake. This, again, is merely a matter of detail, of shading. There can be little doubt that the whole general outline of the man is right, none whatever that he is living and breathing, a truly vital figure. His apology is presented in Mr. Browning's familiar manner of genuine feeling tempered with sophistry. As a piece of dramatic art it is worthy to stand beside his famous earlier apologies; and as a contribution to criticism, to a vital knowledge of the Attic drama and the work and personality of Aristophanes and Euripides, and to a better understanding of the relations of the drama as a criticism of life, it is scarcely less valuable.

23. THE INN ALBUM.

[Published in November, 1875. Translated into German in 1877. "*Das Fremdenbuch* von Robert Browning. Aus dem Englischen von E. Leo. Hamburg: W. Mauke Söhne." A faithful and vigorous translation.]

The story of *The Inn Album* is founded on fact, though it is not, like *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, an almost literal transcript from life. The characters of the poem are four, all unnamed: a young "polished snob" and an impoverished middle-aged nobleman; a woman, once the latter's victim, and now married to a clergyman; and a young girl, her friend, who is betrothed to the younger of the two men. Of these characters, the only one whom Mr. Browning has invented is the girl, through whom, in his telling of the story, the tragedy is brought about. But he has softened the repulsiveness of the original tale, and has also brought it to a ringing close, not supplied by the bare facts. The elder man, whose career did not by any means terminate with the events recorded, was an English peer of very

ancient lineage, and the episode occurred between forty and fifty years ago.

The Inn Album is a story of wrecked lives, lost hopes, of sordid and gloomy villainies; with only light enough to make visible the dreariness of its darkness. It is profoundly sad; yet—

“ These things are life :
And life, they say, is worthy of the Muse.”

It would also be profoundly depressing but for the art which has wrung a grandeur out of grime, which has uplifted a story of mere crime to the height of tragedy. Out of materials that might be melodramatic, Mr. Browning has created a drama of humanity of which the impression is single, intense and overpowering. Notwithstanding the clash of physical catastrophe at the close, it is really a spiritual tragedy; and in it Mr. Browning has achieved that highest of achievements—the right, vivid and convincing presentment of human nature at its highest and lowest, at its extreme of possible action and emotion. It is not perfect: the colloquialism which truth and art alike demand sinks sometimes, though not in the great scenes, to the confines of a bastard realism whose highest merit could only be that it is photography, and photography is not art. But in the main the poem is an excellent example of the higher imaginative realism, of the close, yet poetic or creative, treatment of life.

The four characters who play out the brief and fateful action of this drama in narrative—the poem is more nearly similar in form to the pure drama than any other of all Mr. Browning's poems not cast in the dramatic form—these four, or at least three of them, are creations, in a deeper sense than the characters in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, or than the character in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. The “good gay girl,” serving her unconscious

purpose in the serious action, is properly enough a mere sketch; but the two men and the elder woman are profoundly studied characters, struck into life and revealed to themselves, to one another and to us, at the supreme moment of a complex crisis. The elder man is one of Mr. Browning's most finished studies, and, morally, one of the worst characters even he has ever investigated. He is at once bad, clever and cynical, the combination, of all others, most noxious and most hopeless. He prides himself above all things on his intellect; and it is evident that he has had the power to shape his course and to sway others. But now, at fifty, he knows himself to be a miserable failure. The cause of it he traces mainly to a certain crisis of his life, when he won, only to abuse, the affections of a splendidly beautiful woman, whose equal splendour of soul he saw only when too late. It is significant of him that he never views his conduct as a crime, a wrong to the woman, but as a *mistake* on his part; and his attitude is not that of remorse, but of one who has missed a chance. When, after four years, he meets with startling unexpectedness the woman he has wronged and lost, the good and evil in him blaze out in a sudden and single flame of earnest appeal. In the fact that this passionate appeal should be only half-sincere, or, if sincere, then only for the moment, that to her who hears it, it should seem insincere utterly, lies the intensity of the situation. As a revelation of *some* "soul of goodness," however faint, however distorted, in this veritable thing of evil, it possesses the deepest moral significance presented with finest artistic impressiveness.

The character of the woman, though less complex and considerably less prominent, is drawn with a masterly hand. Like the man, her development has been arrested and distorted by the cause which has made him too a wreck. Her love was single-hearted and over-mastering; its very force, in recoil, turned it into hate. Yoked to a soulless husband;

whom she has married half in pity, half in despair, her whole nature has frozen ; so that when we see her she is, while physically the same, spiritually the ghost of her former self. The subtlety of the picture is to show what she is now while making equally plain what she was in the past. She is a figure not so much pathetic as terrible.

Pathetic, and above all pathetic, despite the comic veneer, which perhaps only strengthens the impression, is the figure of the young man, the great rough foolish rich youth, tutored in evil by his Mephistopheles, but only, we fancy, skin-deep in it, slow of thought but quick of feeling, with his one and only love, never forgotten, and now found again in the very woman whom his "friend" has wronged. His last speech, with its clumsy yet genuine chivalry, its touching broken words, its intrinsic delicacy and faltering expression, is one of the most pathetic things I know. Such a character, in its very absence of subtlety, is a triumph of Mr. Browning's, to whom intellectual simplicity must be the hardest of all dramatic assumptions.

24. PACCHIAROTTO, and how he worked in Distemper : with other poems.

[Published in July, 1876.]

Pacchiarotto and other Poems is the first collection of miscellaneous pieces since the *Dramatis Personæ* of 1864. It is somewhat of an exception to the general rule of Mr. Browning's work. A large proportion of it is critical rather than creative—a criticism of critics ; perhaps it would be at once more correct and concise to call it "Robert Browning's Apology." *Pacchiarotto*, *At the "Mermaid," House, Shop* and *Epilogue*, are all more or less personal utterances on art and the artist, sometimes in a concrete and impersonal way, more often in a somewhat combative and contemptuous spirit. The most important part of the

volume, however, is that which contains the two or three monodramatic poems and the splendid ballad of the fleet, *Hervé Riel*.

The first and longest poem, *Of Pacchiarotto, and how he worked in Distemper*, divides itself into two parts, the first being the humorous rendering of a true anecdote, told in Vasari, of Giacomo Pacchiarotto, a Sienese painter of the sixteenth century; and the second, a still more mirthful onslaught of the poet upon his critics. The story—

“ Begun with a chuckle,
And throughout timed by raps of the knuckle,”—

is funny enough in itself, and it points an excellent moral; but it is chiefly interesting as a whimsical freak of verse, an extravaganza in staccato. The rhyming is of its kind simply perfect, and it is almost incomparable as a sustained effort in double and triple grotesque rhymes. Not even in *Don Juan* is there anything like them. They are not excelled by Butler himself. I think all other experiments of the kind, however successful as a whole, let you see now and then that the author has had a hard piece of work to keep up his appearance of ease. In *Pacchiarotto* there is no evidence of the strain. The masque of critics, under the humiliating and delightfully comic disguise of May-day chimney-sweepers :—

“ ‘ We critics as sweeps out your chimblly !
Much soot to remove from your flue, sir !
Who spares coal in kitchen an’t you, sir !
And neighbours complain it’s no joke, sir !
You ought to consume your own smoke, sir ! ’ ”—

this after-part, overflowing with jolly humour and comic scorn—a besom wielded by a laughing giant—is calculated to put the victims in better humour with their executioner than with themselves. Mr. Browning has had to endure more than most men at the hands of the critics, and he takes in this volume, not in this poem only, a full and a

characteristically good-humoured revenge. The *Epilogue* follows up the pendant to *Pacchiarotto*. There is the same jolly humour, the same combative self-assertiveness, the same retort *Tu quoque*, with a yet more earnest and pungent enforcement.

“Wine, pulse in might from me !

It may never emerge in must from vat,
Never fill cask nor furnish can,
Never end sweet, which strong began—
God’s gift to gladden the heart of man ;
But spirit’s at proof, I promise that !
No sparing of juice spoils what should be
Fit brewage—wine for me.

“Man’s thoughts and loves and hates !

Earth is my vineyard, these grow there :
From grape of the ground, I made or marred
My vintage ; easy the task or hard,
Who set it—his praise be my reward !
Earth’s yield ! Who yearn for the Dark Blue Sea’s
Let them ‘lay, pray, bray’ *—the addle-pates !
Mine be Man’s thoughts, loves, hates !”

Despite its humorous expression, the view of poetic art contained in these verses is both serious and significant. It is a frank (if defiant) confession of faith.

At the “Mermaid,” a very fine poem in a style of great simplicity, is a protest against the supposition or assumption that the personality and personal views and opinions of a poet are necessarily reflected in his dramatic work. It protests, at the same time, against the sham melancholy and pseudo-despair which Byron made fashionable in poetry.

“Have you found your life distasteful ?

My life did and does smack sweet.
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful ?
Mine I saved and hold complete.

* The jocose vindictiveness with which Mr. Browning returns again and again to the assault of the bad grammar and worse rhetoric of Byron’s once so much belauded address to the ocean is very amusing. The above is only one out of four or five instances.

Do your joys with age diminish ?
 When mine fail me, I'll complain.
 Must in death your daylight finish ?
 My sun sets to rise again.

" I find earth not gray but rosy,
 Heaven not grim but fair of hue.
 Do I stoop ? I pluck a posy.
 Do I stand and stare ? All's blue."

House confirms or continues the primary contention in *At the "Mermaid"* : this time by the image of a House of Life, which some poets may choose to set on view : "for a ticket apply to the Publisher." Mr. Browning not merely denounces but denies the so-called self-revelations of poets. He answers Wordsworth's

" With this same key
 Shakespeare unlocked his heart,"

by the characteristic retort :—

" Did Shakespeare ? If so, the less Shakespeare he !"

In *Shop* we have another keen piece of criticism : a protest against poets who make their shop their home, and their song mere ware for sale.

After the personal and critical section we pass to half-a-dozen lyrics : *Fears and Scruples*, a quiet and tender little poem, a doctrine embodied in a character ; then two beautiful little *Pisgah-Sights*, a dainty experiment in metre, and in substance the expression of Mr. Browning's favourite lesson—the worth of earth and the need of the mystery of life ; *Appearances*, a couple of stanzas whose telling simplicity recalls the lovely earlier lilt, *Misconceptions* ; *Natural Magic* and *Magical Nature*, two magical snatches, as perfect as Mr. Browning's "first fine careless rapture." I quote the latter :—

" MAGICAL NATURE.

I.

" Flower—I never fancied, jewel—I profess you !
 Bright I see and soft I feel the outside of a flower.
 Save but glow inside and—jewel, I should guess you,
 Dim to sight and rough to touch : the glory is the dower.

2.

" You, forsooth, a flower ? Nay, my love, a jewel—
 Jewel at no mercy of a moment in your prime !
 Time may fray the flower-face : kind be time or cruel,
 • Jewel, from each facet, flash your laugh at time ! "

But the most wonderful lyric in the volume is *St. Martin's Summer*, — fantastically tragic, hauntingly and meaningfully melodious, imbued with a spirit as of the ghostly visitants at late love's pleasure-bower of whom it sings. I do not think Mr. Browning has written many lyrical poems of more brilliant and incomparable quality. *Bifurcation*, as its name denotes, is a study of divided paths in life, the paths of Love and Duty trodden severally by two lovers whose epitaphs Mr. Browning gives. The moral problem, which is sinner, which is saint, is stated and left open. The poem is an etching, sharp, concise and suggestive. *Numpholeptos* (nymph-entranced) has all the mystery, the vague charm, the lovely sadness, of a picture of Mr. Burne Jones. Its delicately fantastic colouring, its dreamy passion, and the sad and quiet sweetness of its verse, have some affinity with *St. Martin's Summer*, but are unlike anything else in Mr. Browning's works. It is the utterance of a hopeless-hoping and pathetically resigned love : the love of a merely human man for an angelically pure and unhumanly cold woman, who requires in him an unattainable union of immaculate purity and complete experience of life.

" Still you stand, still you listen, still you smile !
 Still melts your moonbeam through me, white awhile,
 Softening, sweetening, till sweet and soft
 Increase so round this heart of mine, that oft

I could believe your moonbeam-smile has past
 The pallid limit, and transformed at last,
 Lies, sunlight and salvation—warms the soul
 It sweetens, softens !

What means the sad slow silver smile above
 My clay but pity, pardon ?—at the best,
 But acquiescence that I take my rest,
 Contented to be clay, while in your heaven
 The sun reserves love for the Spirit—Seven
 Companioning God's throne they lamp before,
 —Leaves earth a mute waste only wandered o'er
 By that pale soft sweet disempassioned moon
 Which smiles me slow forgiveness ! Such the boon
 I beg ? Nay, dear . . .
 Love, the love whole and sole without alloy ! ”

The action of this soul's tragedy takes place under “ the light that never was on sea or land : ” it is the tragedy of a soul, but of a disembodied soul.

A Forgiveness is a drama of this world. It is the legitimate successor of the monologues of the *Men and Women*—it may, indeed, be most precisely compared with an earlier, perhaps the earliest monologue, *My Last Duchess*—and it is, like these, the concentrated essence of a five-act play. Like all the best of Mr. Browning's poems, it is thrown into a striking situation, and developed from this central point. It is the story of a love merged in contempt, quenched in hate, and rekindled in a fatal forgiveness, told in confession to a monk by the man whom the monk has wronged. The personage who speaks is one of the most sharply-outlined characters in Mr. Browning's work : a clear, cold, strong-willed man, implacable in love or hate. He tells his story in a quiet, measured, utterly unemotional manner, with reflective interruptions and explanations—the acute analysis of a merciless intellect ; leading gradually up to a crisis only to be matched by the very finest crises in the works of Mr. Browning himself. It runs thus :—

"Immersed
In thought so deeply, Father? Sad, perhaps?
For whose sake, hers or mine or his who wraps
—Still plain I seem to see!—about his head
The idle cloak,—about his heart (instead
Of cuirass) some fond hope he may elude
My vengeance in the cloister's solitude?
Hardly, I think! As little helped his brow
The cloak then, Father—as your grate helps now!"

The poem is by far the greatest thing in the volume; it is, indeed, almost as fine an example as exists of Mr. Browning's psychological subtlety and concentrated dramatic power.*

Of the splendid ballad of *Herut Riel* I suppose no one is in ignorance. It was written at Croisic, Sept. 30, 1867, and published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, March, 1871, its *honorary* of £100 being sent to the Paris Relief Fund. Among modern naval ballads it has no rival but Lord Tennyson's *Revenge*. It may be named, with the "Ride from Ghent to Aix," as a proof of how simply and graphically Mr. Browning can write; how he can—as few other poets can or could—stir the blood and thrill the heart. The facts of the story, telling how, after the battle of the Hogue, a simple Croisic sailor saved all that was left of the French fleet by guiding the vessels into the harbour, are given in the Croisic guide-books; and Mr. Browning has followed them in everything save the very effective end:—

" ' Since 'tis ask and have, I may—

Since the others go ashore—

" Come! A good whole holiday!

Leave to go and see my wife, whom I call the Belle Aurore!

That he asked and that he got,—nothing more."

* It is worth comparing *A Forgiveness* with a poem of very similar motive by M. Leconte de Lisle—*Le Jugement de Komor* (*Poèmes Bardes*). Each is a fine example of its author, in just those qualities for which both poets are eminent—originality and subtlety of subject, pregnant picturesqueness of phrase and situation, and grimly tragic power. The contrast no less than the likeness which exists between them will be evident on a comparison of the two poems.

"Ce brave homme," says the account, "ne demanda pour récompense d'un service aussi signalé, qu'un *congé absolu* pour rejoindre sa femme, qu'il nomma la Belle Aurore."

Cenciaja, the only blank verse piece in the volume, is of the nature of a note or appendix to Shelley's "superb achievement" *The Cenci*. It serves to explain the allusion to the case of Paolo Santa Croce (*Cenci*, Act V., sc. iv.). Mr. Browning obtained the facts from a MS. volume of memorials of Italian crime, in the possession of Sir John Simeon, who published it in the series of the Philobiblon Society.*

Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial, a grotesque and humorously-told "reminiscence of A.D. 1670," is, up to stanza 35, the versification of an anecdote recorded by Baldinucci, the artist and art critic (1624—1696), in his *History of Painters*. The incident with which it concludes is imaginary.

25. THE AGAMEMNON OF ÆSCHYLUS.

[Published in October, 1877.]

Mr. Browning prefaces his transcript of the *Agamemnon* with a brief introduction, in which he sets forth his theory of translation as follows:—

"If, because of the immense fame of the following Tragedy, I wished to acquaint myself with it, and could only do so by the help of a translator, I should require him to be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language. The use of certain allowable

* In reference to the title, *Cenciaja*, and the Italian proverb which follows it, *Ogni cencio vuol entrare in bucato*, Mr. Browning stated, in a letter to Mr. H. B. Forman (printed in his *Shelley*, 1880, ii. 419), that "'aia' is generally an accumulative yet depreciative termination: 'Cenciaja'—a bundle of rags—a trifle. The proverb means 'Every poor creature will be pressing into the company of his betters,' and I used it to deprecate the notion that I intended anything of the kind."

constructions which, happening to be out of daily favour, are all the more appropriate to archaic workmanship, is no violence: but I would be tolerant for once,—in the case of so immensely famous an original,—of even a clumsy attempt to furnish me with the very turn of each phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear: while, with respect to amplifications and embellishments, anything rather than, with the good farmer, experience that most signal of mortifications, “to gape for Æschylus and get Theognis.” I should especially decline,—what may appear to brighten up a passage,—the employment of a new word for some old one—*πῶρος*, or *μέγας*, or *τέλος*, with its congeners, recurring four times in three lines. . . . Further,—if I obtained a mere strict bald version of thing by thing, or at least word pregnant with thing, I should hardly look for an impossible transmission of the reputed magniloquence and sonority of the Greek; and this with the less regret, inasmuch as there is abundant musicality elsewhere, but nowhere else than in his poem the ideas of the poet. And lastly, when presented with these ideas, I should expect the result to prove very hard reading indeed if it were meant to resemble Æschylus.”

Mr. Browning has carried out, with unflinching courage, every condition here laid down. He has rendered word by word and line by line; with, indeed, some slight inevitable expansion in the rhymed choruses, very slight, infinitely slighter than any other translator has been able to do with; so that we have in this version of the greatest tragedy of antiquity a veritable photograph of the original. I need only to point to two admirable reviews which appeared at the time of its publication—that in the *Athenæum*, and that by Mr. Symonds in the *Academy*—for numerous instances (which might be indefinitely extended) of minute and happy accuracies of phrase,—re-creations of the very thoughts of Æschylus,—and of incomparable “dexterity in matching word for word, and maintaining the exact order of the original.” But for this very reason, as a consequence of this very virtue, there is no denying that Mr. Browning’s version is certainly “very hard reading,” so hard reading that it is sometimes necessary to refer to the Greek for the explanation of the English. Mr. Browning has anticipated.

but not altogether answered, this objection. For, besides those passages which simply reproduce the obscurity of the original, there is much that seems either obscure or harsh, and is so simply because it gives "the turn of each phrase," not merely "in as Greek a fashion as English will bear," but beyond it: phrases which are native to Greek, foreign to English. It is, then, no doubt, the scholar rather than the general reader who, in Mr. Symonds' words, will find most to please him in "this attempt to give our language the similitude of Greek by close and sustained grappling, word to word, with so sublime and difficult a masterpiece."

26. LA SAISIAZ: THE TWO POETS OF CROISIC.

[Published in May, 1878. *La Saisiaz* (written November, 1877), pp. 1-82; *The Two Poets of Croisic*, pp. 83-201.].

In *La Saisiaz* Mr. Browning reasons of God and the Soul, of life here and of life to come. The poem is addressed to a friend of old date, who died suddenly while she was staying with Mr. Browning and his sister, in the summer of 1877, at a villa called La Saisiaz (The Sun) in the mountains near Geneva. The first twenty pages tell the touching story; the rest of the poem records the argument which it called forth. "Was ending ending once and always, when you died?" asks Mr. Browning of himself, and he attempts to answer the question, not on traditional grounds, or on the authority of a creed, but by honest reasoning. He assumes two postulates, and two only,—that God exists and that the soul exists; and he proceeds to show, very forcibly, the unsatisfactory nature of life if consciousness ends with death, and its completely satisfactory nature if the soul's existence continues.

"Without the want,

Life, now human, would be brutish: just that hope, however scant,
Makes the actual life worth leading; take the hope therein away,
All we have to do is surely not endure another day.

This life has its hopes for this life, hopes that promise joy : life done—
Out of all the hopes, how many had complete fulfilment ? none.
' But the soul is not the body : ' and the breath is not the flute ;
Both together make the music : either marred and all is mute."

This hypothesis is purely personal, and as such he holds it.
But, to his own mind at least, he finds that

" Sorrow did and joy did nowise,—life well weighed,—preponderate.
By necessity ordained thus ? I shall bear as best I can ;
By a cause all-good, all-wise, all-potent ? No, as I am man ! "

Yet, if only the assumption of a future life may be made, he will thankfully acquiesce in an earthly failure, which will then be only relative, and the earnest of a heavenly gain. Having arrived at this point, Mr. Browning proceeds to argue out the question yet further, under the form of a dialogue between " Fancy " (or the soul's instinct) and " Reason." He here shows that not merely is life explicable only as a probation, but that probation is only possible under our present conditions, in our present uncertainty. If it were made certain that there is a future life in which we shall be punished or rewarded, according as we do evil or good, we should have no choice of action, hence no virtue in doing what were so manifestly to our own advantage. Again, if we were made certain of this future life of higher faculties and greater happiness, should we hesitate to rush to it at the first touch of sorrow, before our time ? He ends, therefore, with a " hope—no more than hope, but hope—no less than hope," which amounts practically to the assurance that, as he puts it in the last line—

" He at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God ! "

The Two Poets of Croisic is a comedy in narrative, dealing mainly with the true tale of Paul Desforges-Maillard, whose story furnished Piron with the matter of his *Mitromanie*. The first of the " two poets " is one René

Gentilhomme, born 1610, once page to the Prince of Condé, afterwards court-poet to Louis XIII. His story, by an easy transition, leads into the richer record of Desforges, which Mr. Browning gives with not a few variations, evidently intentional, from the facts of the case. Paul-Briand Maillard, self-surnamed Desforges, was born at Croisic, April 24, 1699 : he died at the age of seventy-three. His memory has survived that of better poets than himself on account of the famous hoax which he played on the Paris of his day, including no less a person than Voltaire. The first part of the story is told pretty literally in Mr. Browning's pages : how Desforges, unsuccessful as a poet in his own person, assumed the title of a woman, and as Mlle. Malcrais de la Vigne (his verses being copied by an obliging cousin, Mme. Mondoret) obtained an immediate and astonishing reputation. The sequel is somewhat altered by Mr. Browning. Voltaire's revenge when the cheat was discovered, so far from being prompt and immediate, was treacherously dissimulated, and its accomplishment deferred for more than one long-subsequent occasion. Desforges lived to have the last word, in assisting at the first representation of Piron's *Métromanie*, in which Voltaire's humiliation and the Croisic poet's clever trick are perpetuated for as long as that sprightly and popular comedy shall be remembered.

Mr. Browning, in his graphic and condensed version of the tale, has used a poet's licence to heighten the effect and increase the piquancy of the narrative. The poem is written in *ottava rima*, but, very singularly, there is not one double rhyme from beginning to end. It is difficult to see why Mr. Browning, a finer master of grotesque compound rhymes than Byron, should have so carefully avoided them in a metre which, as in Byron's hands, owes no little of its effect to a clever introduction of such rhymes. The lines (again of set purpose, it is evident) overlap one another without an end-pause where in Italian it is almost universal,—namely,

after the sixth line. The result of the innovation is far from successful : it destroys the flow of the verse and gives it an air of abruptness. Of the liveliness, vivacity and pungency of the tale, no idea can be given by quotation : two of the stanzas in which the moral is enforced, the two finest, perhaps, in the poem, are, however, severable from their connection :—

“ Who knows most, doubts most ; entertaining hope,
Means recognizing fear ; the keener sense
Of all comprised within our actual scope
Recoils from aught beyond earth's dim and dense.
Who, grown familiar with the sky, will grope
Henceforward among groundlings ? That's offence
Just as indubitably : stars abound
O'erhead, but then—what flowers make glad the ground !

“ So, force is sorrow, and each sorrow, force :
What then ? since Swiftmess gives the charioteer
The palm, his hope be in the vivid horse
Whose neck God clothed with thunder, not the steer
Sluggish and safe ! Yoke Hatred, Crime, Remorse,
Despair : but ever mid the whirling fear,
Let, through the tumult, break the poet's face
Radiant, assured his wild slaves win the race ! ’

The poem is followed by an exquisite Epilogue, one of the most delicately graceful and witty and tender of Mr. Browning's lyrics : but unfortunately it is too long to quote. I may, however, cite the beautiful Prologue :—

“ Such a starved bank of moss
Till, that May-morn,
Blue ran the flash across :
Violets were born !

“ Sky—what a scowl of cloud
Till, near and far,
Ray on ray split the shroud :
Splendid, a star !

“ World—how it walled about
Life with disgrace
Till God’s own smile came out :
That was thy face ! ”

27. DRAMATIC IDYLS.

[Published in May, 1879.]

In the *Dramatic Idyls* Mr. Browning may almost be said to have broken new ground. His idyls are short poems of passionate action, presenting in the most graphic and concentrated way a single episode or tragic crisis. Not only by their concreteness and popular effectiveness, their extraordinary vigour of conception and expression, are they distinguished from much of Mr. Browning’s later writing : they have in addition this significant novelty of interest, that here for the first time Mr. Browning has found subjects for his poetry among the poor, that here for the first time he has painted, with all his graphic realism, the human comedy of the lower classes. That he has never done so before, though rather surprising, arises, I suppose, from the prevailing intellectuality of the subtlest of poets, and the impossibility of infusing anything of the sort into what M. Léon Cladel calls *tragiques histoires plébéiennes*. But the happy instinct has here come to him, and we are permitted to watch the humours of that most delicious pair of sinners saved, “ Publican Black Ned Bratts and Tabby his big wife too,” as a relief to the less pleasant and profitable spectacle of His Majesty Napoleon III., or of even the two poets of Croisic. All the poems in the volume (with the exception of a notable and noble protest against vivisection, in the form of a touching little true tale of a dog,) are connected together by a single motive, on which every poem plays a new variation. The motto of the book might be :—

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune ;
Omitted, all the voyage of his life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries."

This idea of a turning-point or testing-time in the lives of men is more or less expressed or implied in very much of Mr. Browning's poetry, but nowhere is it expressed so completely, so concisely, or so consecutively, as here. In *Martin Relph* (which "embodies," says Mrs. Orr, "a vague remembrance of something read by Mr. Browning when he was himself a boy") we have an instance of the tide "omitted," and a terrible picture of the remorse which follows. Martin Relph has the chance presented to him of saving two lives—that of the girl he loves and of his rival whom she loves. The chance is but of an instant's duration. He hesitates, and the moment is for ever lost. In that one moment his true soul, with its instinctive selfishness, has leapt to light, and the knowledge of it torments him with an inextinguishable agony. In *Ivàn Ivànovitch* (founded on a popular Russian story of a woman throwing her children to the wolves to save her own life) we have a twofold illustration of the theme. The testing-moment comes to the mother, Louscha, and again to Ivàn Ivànovitch. While the woman fails terribly in her duty, and meets a terrible reward, the man rises to a strange and awful nobility of action, and "acts for God." *Halbert and Hob*, a grim little tragedy (suggested by a passage in the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle), presents us with the same idea in a singularly concrete form. The crisis has a saving effect, but it is an incomplete, an unwilling or irresistible, act of grace, and it bears but sorry fruit. In *Ned Bratts* (suggested by the story of "Old Tod," in Bunyan's *Life and Death of Mr. Badman* *) we have a prompt and

* "At a summer Assizes holden at *Hartfort*, while the Judge was sitting upon the Bench, comes this old *Tod* into the Court, cloathed in a green Suit, with his Leathern Girdle in his hand, his bosom open, and all on a dung

quite hurried taking of the tide: the sudden conversion, repentance, and expiation of the "worst couple, rogue and quean, unchanged." *Pheidippides* (the legend of the runner who brought the news of Marathon to Athens, and died in the utterance) illustrates the idea in a more obvious but less individual way.

The three principal poems are undoubtedly *Ivàn Ivàn-ovitch*, *Ned Bratts* and *Martin Relph*. *Martin Relph*, besides being a fine tale splendidly told, is one of the most masterly renderings of remorse—of the terrors and 'torments of conscience—ever attempted. Every word is as a drop of agony wrung out of a tortured soul. *Ivàn Ivàn-ovitch* is, as a narrative, still finer: Mr. Browning has never excelled it as a piece of story-telling. Nothing could be more graphic and exciting than the description of the approach of the wolves: the effective change from iambs to anapæsts gives their very motion.

"Was that—wind?"

Anyhow, Droug starts, stops, back go his ears, he snuffs,
Snorts,—never such a snort! then plunges, knows the sough's
Only the wind: yet, no—our breath goes up too straight!
Still the low'sound,—less low, loud, louder, at a rate
There's no mistaking more! Shall I lean out—look—learn
The truth whatever it be? Pad, pad! At last, I turn——

sweat, as if he had run for his Life; and, being come in, he spake aloud as follows: *My Lord*, said he, *Here is the veryest Rogue that breaths upon the face of the earth. . . My Lord, there has not been a Robbery committed this many years, within so many miles of this place but I have either been at it or privy to it.*

"The Judge thought the fellow was mad, but after some conference with some of the Justices, they agreed to Indict him; and so they did, of several felonious Actions; to all of which he heartily confessed Guilty, and so was hanged with his wife at the same time. . . .

"As for the truth of this Story, the Relator told me that he was at the same time himself in the Court, and stood within less than two yards of old *Tod*, when he heard him aloud to utter the words."—Bunyan's *Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, 1680.

“ Tis the regular pad of the wolves in pursuit of the life in the sledge !
 An army they are : close-packed they press like the thrust of a wedge :
 They increase as they hunt : for I see, through the pine-trunks
 ranged each side,
 Slip forth new fiend and fiend, make wider and still more wide
 The four-footed steady advance. The foremost—none may pass :
 They are elders and lead the line, eye and eye—green-glowing
 brass !
 But a long way distant still. Droug, save us ! He does his best :
 Yet they gain on us, gain, till they reach,—one reaches . . .
 How utter the rest ? ”

The setting of the story is also admirable. The vast motionless Russian landscape, the village life, the men and women, are all vividly painted ; and the revelation of the woman's character—the exposure of her culpable weakness, seen in the very excuses by which she endeavours to justify herself—is brought about with singularly masterly art. Touches like that on p. 77 : “ No fear your mother flings . . . Flings ? I fling ? Never ! ” are of the very highest order of art. The same compression and suggestiveness will be seen in the last lines, above all in those two pregnant words : “ *How otherwise ?* ” asked he.”

Ned Bratts takes almost the same position among Mr. Browning's humorous poems that *Ivàn Ivànovitch* does among his narratives. A humorous conception more thorough and original has seldom been put into verse. It is a whole comedy in itself. Surroundings and atmosphere are called up with perfect art and the subtlest sympathy. What opening could be a better preparation for the heated and grotesque utterances of Ned Bratts than the wonderful description of the hot day ? It serves to put us into precisely the right mood for seeing and feeling the comic tragedy that follows. Dickens himself never painted a more riotously realistic scene, nor delineated a better ruffian than the murderous rascal precariously converted by Bunyan and his book.

In the midst of these realistic tragedies and comedies, *Pheidippides*, with its clear Greek outline and charm and heroical grace, stands finely contrasted. The measure is an invention of Mr. Browning's, and is finely appropriate to the character of the poem

" So, to this day, when friend meets friend, the word of salute
Is still ' Rejoice ! '—his word which brought rejoicing indeed.
So is Pheidippides happy for ever,—the noble strong man
Who could race like a God, bear the face of a God, whom a God
loved so well
He saw the land saved he had helped to save, and was suffered to tell
Such tidings, yet never decline, but, gloriously as he began,
So to end gloriously—once to shout, thereafter be mute :
' Athens is saved ! '—Pheidippides dies in the shout for his meed."

28. DRAMATIC IDYLS. Second Series.

[Published in July, 1880.]

The second series of *Dramatic Idyls* is bound together, like the first, though somewhat less closely, by a leading idea, which, whether consciously or not, is indicated in a pointed little prologue: the idea of the paradox of human action, and the apparent antagonism between motive and that which it results in. The volume differs considerably from its precursor, and it contains nothing quite equal to the best of the earlier poems. There is more variety, perhaps, but the human interest is less intense, the stories are less moving and absorbing. With less humour, there is a much more pronounced element of grotesquerie. And most prominent of all is that characteristic of Mr. Browning which is best represented by the term intellectual agility.

The first poem, *Echelos*, is full of heroical ardour and firm, manly vigour of movement. Like *Pheidippides*, it is a legend of Marathon. It sings of the mysterious helper who

appeared to the Greeks, in rustic garb and armed with a plough.

"But one man kept no rank and his sole arm plied no spear,
As a flashing came and went, and a form i' the van, the rear,
Brightened the battle up, for he blazed now there, now here.

"Did the steady phalanx falter? To the rescue, at the need,
The clown was ploughing Persia, clearing Greek earth of weed,
As he routed through the Sakian and rooted up the Mede."

After the battle, the man was nowhere to be seen, and inquiry was made of the oracle.

"How spake the Oracle? 'Care for no name at all!
Say but just this: We praise one helpful whom we call
The Holder of the Ploughshare. The great deed ne'er grows small."

With *Echetlos* may be mentioned the Virgilian legend of *Pan and Luna*, a piece of graceful fancy, with its exquisite burden, that

"Verse of five words, each a boon:
Arcadia, night, a cloud, Pan, and the moon."

Clive, the most popular in style, and certainly one of the finest poems in the volume, is a dramatic monologue very much akin, in subject, treatment and form, to the narratives in the first series. The story deals with an episode in the life of Clive, when, as a young man, he first proved his courage in the face of a bully whom he had caught cheating at cards. The poem is full of fire and brilliance, and remarkably subtle in its analysis and presentation of the character of Clive. Its structure is quite in Mr. Browning's best manner: a central situation, illumined by "what double and treble reflections of the mind upon itself!" Like Balzac—whose *Honorine*, for instance, is constructed on precisely similar lines—Mr. Browning often increases the effect of his picture by setting it in a framework, more or

less elaborate,—by placing the central narrative in the midst of another slighter and secondary one, in some way subtly related to it. The story of *Clive* obtains emphasis, and is rendered much more impressive, by the lightly but strongly sketched-in figure of the old veteran who tells the tale. Scarcely anything in the poem seems to me so fine as this pathetic portrait of the lonely old man, sitting, like Colonel Newcome, solitary in his house among his memories, with his boy away: "I and Clive were friends."

The Arabian tale of *Mulýkeh* is the most perfect and pathetic piece in the volume. It is told in singularly fine verse, and in remarkably clear, simple, yet elevated style. Hóseyn, though he has neither herds nor flocks, is the richest and happiest of men, for he possesses the peerless mare, Mulýkeh the Pearl, whose speed has never been outstripped. Duhl, the son of Sheybán, who envies Hóseyn his matchless possession, and who has endeavoured by every means, but without success, to obtain the mare, determines at last to steal her. He enters Hóseyn's tent noiselessly by night, saddles Mulýkeh, and gallops away. In an instant Hóseyn is on the back of Buhýseh, the Pearl's sister, only less fleet than herself, and in pursuit.

"And Hóseyn—his blood turns flame, he has learned long since to ride,

And Buhýseh does her part,—they gain—they are gaining fast
On the fugitive pair, and Duhl has Ed-Dárraj to cross and quit,
And to reach the ridge El-Sabán,—no safety till that be spied !
And Buhýseh is, bound by bound, but a horse-length off at last,
For the Pearl has missed the tap of the heel, the touch of the bit.

"She shortens her stride, she chafes at her rider the strange and queer :
Buhýseh is mad with hope—beat sister she shall and must,
Though Duhl, of the hand and heel so clumsy, she has to thank.
She is near now, nose by tail—they are neck by croup—joy ! fear !
What folly makes Hóseyn shout ' Dog Duhl, Damned son of the
Dust,

Touch the right ear and press with your foot my Pearl's left flank !'

- “ And Duhl was wise at the word, and Muléykeh as prompt perceived
 Who was urging redoubled pace, and to hear him was to obey,
 And a leap indeed gave she, and vanished for evermore.
 And Hóseyn looked one long last look as who, all bereaved,
 Looks, fain to follow the dead so far as the living may :
 Then he turned Buhéyseh's neck slow homeward, weeping sore .
- “ And, lo, in the sunrise, still sat Hóseyn upon the ground
 Weeping : and neighbours came, the tribesmen of Bénu-Asád
 In the vale of green Er-Rass, and they questioned him of his
 grief ;
 And he told them from first to last how, serpent-like, Duhl had
 wound
 His way to the nest, and how Duhl rode like an ape, so bad !
 And how Buhéyseh did wonders, yet Pearl remained with the
 thief.
- “ And they jeered him, one and all : ‘ Poor Hóseyn is crazed
 past hope !
 How else had he wrought himself his ruin, in fortune's spite !
 To have simply held the tongue were a task for a boy or girl,
 And here were Muléykeh again, the eyed like an antelope,
 The child of his heart by day, the wife of his breast by night ! ’
 ‘ And the beaten in speed ! ’ wept Hóseyn : ‘ You never have
 loved my Pearl ! ’ ”

There remain *Pietro of Abano* * and *Doctor* —. The latter, a Talmudic legend, is probably the poorest of Mr. Browning's poems : it is rather farce than humour. The former is a fine piece of true grotesque art, full of pungent humour, acuteness, worldly wisdom, and clever phrasing

* Pietro of Abano was an Italian physician, alchemist and philosopher, born at Abano, near Padua, in 1246, died about 1320. He had the reputation of a wizard, and was imprisoned by the Inquisition. He was condemned to be burnt ; he died in prison, and his dead body was ordered to be burnt ; it having been removed by friends, the Inquisition then burnt his portrait. His reputed antipathy to milk and cheese, with its natural analogy, suggested the motive of the poem. The book referred to in it is his principal work, *Conciliator differentiarum quæ inter philosophos et medicos versantur*, Mantua, 1472.

and rhyming. It is written in a capital comic metre of Mr. Browning's construction. The poem is one of the most characteristic examples of that "Teutonic grotesque, which lies in the expression of deep ideas through fantastic forms,"—a grotesque of noble and cultivated art—of which Mr. Browning is as great a master in poetry as Carlyle was in prose.

The volume ends with a charming lyrical epilogue, not without its personal bearing, though it has sometimes, very unfairly, been represented as a piece of mere self-gratulation.

"Thus I wrote in London, musing on my betters,"

said Mr. Browning in some album-verses which have found their way into print, and he naturally complains that what he wrote of Dante should be foisted upon himself. Indeed, he has quite as much the characteristics of the "spontaneous" as of the "brooding" poet of his parable.

" 'Touch him ne'er so lightly, into song he broke :
Soil so quick-receptive,—not one feather-seed,
Not one flower-dust fell, but straight its fall awoke
Vitalising virtue : song would song succeed
Sudden as spontaneous—prove a poet soul !'

Indeed ?

Rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare :
Sun and dew their mildness, storm and frost their rage
Vainly both expend,—few flowers awaken there :
Quiet in its cleft broods—what the after age
Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage."

29. JOCOSERIA.

[Published in March, 1883.]

The name *Jocoseria* (mentioned by Mr. Browning in its original connection—Melander's "*Jocoseria*"—in the notes to *Paracelsus*) expresses very cleverly the particular nature of the volume, in its close union and fusion of grave and

gay. The volume is not, as a whole, so intense or so brilliant as the first and second series of *Dramatic Idyls*, but one or two of the shorter poems are, in their way, unexcelled by anything in either volume.

The longest poem, though hardly the best, is the imaginary Rabbinical legend of *Jochanan Hakkadosh* (John the Saint), which Mr. Browning, with a touch of learned quizzicalness, states in his note* "to have no better authority than that of the treatise, existing dispersedly, in fragments of Rabbinical writing, [the name, 'Collection of many Lies,' follows in Hebrew,] from which I might have helped myself more liberally." It is written in *terza rima*, like *Doctor* — in the *Dramatic Idyls*, and Mr. Browning brings it forward as a fellow or a follower of that. It is unquestionably far superior to the earlier and flimsier poem, though it seems to me that its effectiveness as an example of the serio-grotesque would have been heightened by some metre less sober and placid than the *terza rima*—by rhythm and rhyme as audacious and characteristic as the rhythm and the rhymes of *Pietro of Abano*, for instance.

Ixion, a far finer poem than *Jochanan Hakkadosh*, notwithstanding the many fine passages of the latter, is, no doubt, an equally sincere utterance of personal belief. The poem is a monologue, in unrhymed hexameters and pentameters. It presents the familiar myth in a new and suggestive light. *Ixion* is represented as the Prometheus of man's righteous revolt against the tyranny of an unjust God. It is conceived in a spirit of intense earnestness, and is worked out with immense vigour and splendour of diction. In passion and eloquence nothing surpasses the finely culminating peroration, of which I can only give a very few lines, torn only too barbarously from their context :—

* This note contains three burlesque sonnets, of very original workmanship, particularly interesting as the first sonnets ever published by Mr. Browning, and the only ones yet contained in any of his volumes.

"What is the influence, high o'er Hell, that turns to a rapture
 Pain—and despair's mure blends in a rainbow of hope?
 What is beyond the obstruction, stage by stage tho' it baffle?
 Back must I fall, confess 'Ever the weakness I fled?'
 No, for beyond, far, far is a Purity all-unobstructed!
 Zeus was Zeus—not Man: wrecked by his weakness I whirl.
 Out of the wreck I rise—past Zeus to the Potency o'er him!
 I—to have hailed him my friend! I—to have clasped her—my
 love!
 Pallid birth of my pain,—where light, where light is, aspiring
 Thither I rise, whilst thou—Zeus, keep the godship and sink!"

While *Ixion* is the noblest and most heroically passionate of these poems, *Adam, Lilith, and Eve*, is the most pregnant and suggestive. Mr. Browning has scarcely ever excelled it, even in his own finest style of penetrating bitterness and exquisitely tempered intensity.

"ADAM, LILITH, AND EVE.

- "One day it thundered and lightened.
 Two women, fairly frightened,
 Sank to their knees, transformed, transfixed,
 At the feet of the man who sat betwixt;
 And 'Mercy!' cried each, 'If I tell the truth
 Of a passage in my youth!'

 "Said This: 'Do you mind the morning
 I met your love with scorning?
 As the worst of the venom left my lips,
 I thought, 'If, despite this lie, he strips
 The mask from my soul with a kiss—I crawl,
 His slave,—soul, body and all!'"
- "Said That: 'We stood to be married;
 The priest, or someone, tarried;
 "If Paradise-door prove locked?" smiled you.
 I thought, as I nodded, smiling too,
 "Did one, that's away, arrive—nor late
 Nor soon should unlock Hell's gate!"
- "It ceased to lighten and thunder.
 Up started both in wonder,

Looked round, and saw that the sky was clear,
 Then laughed 'Confess you believed us, Dear !'
 'I saw through the joke !' the man replied
 They seated themselves beside."

Very much of the same power is shown in *Cristina and Monaldeschi*,* a dramatic monologue with all the old vigour of Mr. Browning's early work of that kind ; as thrilling as it is keen and subtle, and alive with that electrical power which seems to be latent in some of such poems, darting out with a vivid and convincing shock from time to time. The style and tone are infused with a peculiar fierce irony. The metre is of novel but very fine construction, rapid and stinging as the words of the vindictive queen as she hurries her treacherous victim into the hands of the assassins. Take the first stanza for witness :—

" Ah, but how each loved each, Marquis !
 Here's the gallery they trod
 Both together, he her god,
 She his idol,—lend your rod,
 Chamberlain !—ay, there they are—' *Quits*
Separabit ?'—plain those two
 Touching words come into view,
 Apposite for me and you !"

Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli, a dramatic lyric of three verses, the pathetic utterance of an unloved loving woman's heart, is not dissimilar in style to *Cristina and Monaldeschi*. It would be unjust to Fuseli to name him Bottom, but only fair to Mary Wollstonecraft to call her Titania.

Of the remaining poems, *Donald*—"a true story, repeated to Mr. Browning by one who had heard it from its hero, the so-called Donald, himself," †—is a ballad, not at all in Mr. Browning's best style, but certainly vigorous and

* One can scarcely read this poem without recalling the superb and not unsimilar episode in prose of another "great dramatic poet"—Landor's *Imaginary Conversation of the Empress Catharine and Princess Dashkof*.

† Mrs. Orr, *Handbook*, p. 313.

striking, directed against the brutalising influences of sport, as *Tray* was directed against the infinitely worse brutalities of ignorant and indiscriminate vivisection. Its noble human sympathies and popular style appeal to a ready audience. *Solomon and Balkis*, though by no means among the best of Mr. Browning's comic poems, is a witty little tale enough from that inexhaustible repository, the Talmud. It is a dialogue between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, not "solely" nor at all "of things sublime." *Pambo* is a bit of pointed fun, a mock-modest apology to critics. Finally, besides a musical little love-song named *Wanting is—What?* we have in *Never the Time and the Place* an exquisitely spontaneous lyric, which, in its strength of spiritual passion and intensity of serene and joyous hope, it would be hard indeed to excel.

" NEVER THE TIME AND THE PLACE.

" Never the time and the place
 And the loved one all together !
 This path—how soft to pace !
 This May—what magic weather !
 Where is the loved one's face ?
 In a dream that loved one's face meets mine,
 But the house is narrow, the place is bleak
 Where, outside, rain and wind combine
 With a furtive ear, if I strive to speak,
 With a hostile eye at my flushing cheek,
 With a malice that marks each word, each sign !
 O enemy sly and serpentine,
 Uncoil thee from the waking man !
 Do I hold the Past
 Thus firm and fast
 Yet doubt if the Future hold I can ?
 This path so soft to pace shall lead
 Thro' the magic of May to herself indeed !
 Or narrow if needs the house must be,
 Outside are the storms and strangers: we—
 Oh, close, safe, warm, sleep I and she,
 —I and she !"

30. FERISHTAH'S FANCIES.

[Published in November, 1884.]

Ferishtah's Fancies consists of twelve sections, each an argument in an allegory, Persian by presentment, modern or universal in intention.* Lightly laid in between the sections, like flowers between the leaves, are twelve lyrics, mostly love songs addressed to a beloved memory, each lyric having a close affinity with the preceding "Fancy." A humorous lyrical prologue and a passionate lyrical epilogue complete the work. We learn from Mrs. Orr, that

"the idea of *Ferishtah's Fancies* grew out of a fable by Pilpay, which Mr. Browning read when a boy. He . . . put this into verse; and it then occurred to him to make the poem the beginning of a series, in which the Dervish who is first introduced as a learner should reappear in the character of a teacher. Ferishtah's 'fancies' are the familiar illustrations by which his teachings are enforced."†

The book is Mr. Browning's *West-Eastern Divan*, and it is written at near the same age as Goethe's. But, though there is a good deal of local colour in the setting, no attempt, as the motto warns us, is made to reproduce Eastern thought. The "Persian garments" are used for a disguise, not as a habit; perhaps for the very reason that the thoughts they drape are of such intense personal sincerity. The drapery, however, is perfectly transparent, and one may read "Robert Browning" for "Dervish Ferishtah" *passim*.

The first two Fancies (*The Eagle* and *The Melon-Seller*) give the lessons which Ferishtah learnt, and which deter-

* This is emphasized by the ingenious motto from *King Lear*: "You, Sir, I entertain you for one of my Hundred; only, I do not like the fashion of your garments: you will say, they are Persian; but let them be changed."

† *Handbook*, p. 321.

mined him to become a Dervish: all the rest are his own lessons to others. These deal severally with faith (*Shah Abbas*), prayer (*The Family*), the Incarnation (*The Sun*), the meaning of evil and of pain (*Mihrab Shah*), punishment present and future (*A Camel-Driver*), asceticism (*Two Camels*), gratefulness to God for small benefits (*Cherries*), the direct personal relation existing between man and God (*Plot-Culture*), the uncertain value of knowledge contrasted with the sure gain of love (*A Pillar at Sebzevah*), and, finally, in *A Bean-Stripe: also Apple Eating*, the problem of life—is it more good than evil, or more evil than good? The work is a serious attempt to grapple with these great questions, and is fully as important on its ethical as on its artistic side. Each argument is conveyed by means of a parable, often brilliant, often quaint, always striking and serviceable, and always expressed in scrupulously clear and simple language. The teaching, it need scarcely be said, is the same that Mr. Browning has given us all through his career: the utterance of a sturdy but by no means facile optimism, not untried, indeed, but unconquerable.

The most purely delightful poetry in the volume will be found in the delicate and musical love-songs which stud and brighten its pages. They are snatches of spontaneous and exquisite song, bird-notes seldom heard save from the lips of youth. Perhaps the most perfect is the first.

“ Round us the wild creatures, overhead the trees,
Underfoot the moss-tracks,—life and love with these!
I to wear a fawn-skin, thou to dress in flowers:
All the long lone Summer-day, that greenwood life of ours!

“ Rich-pavilioned, rather,—still the world without,—
Inside—gold-roofed silk-walled silence round about!
Queen it thou in purple,—I, at watch and ward
Couched beneath the columns, gaze, thy slave, love's guard!

"So, for us no world? Let throngs press thee to me!
 Up and down amid men, heart by heart fare we!
 Welcome squalid vesture, harsh voice, hateful face!
 God is soul, souls I and thou: with souls should souls have place."

31. PARLEYINGS WITH CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE IN THEIR DAY.

[Published in January, 1887.]

•The method of the *Parleyings* is something of a new departure, and at the same time something of a reversion. It is a reversion towards the dramatic form of the monologue; but it is a new departure owing to the precise form assumed, that of a "parleying" or colloquy of the author with his characters. The persons with whom Mr. Browning parleys are representative men selected from the England, Holland, and Italy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The parleying with *Bernard de Mandeville* (born at Dort, in Holland, 1670; died in London, 1733; author of *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*) takes up the optimistic arguments already developed in *Ferishtah's Fancies* and elsewhere, and preaches, through the dubious medium of the enigmatic fabulist, trust in the ordering of the world, confidence in discerning a "soul of goodness in things evil." *Daniel Bartoli* ("a learned and ingenious writer," born at Florence, 1608; died at Rome, 1685; the historian of the Order of Jesuits) serves to point a moral against himself, in the contrast between the pale ineffectual saints of his legendary record and the practically saint-like heroine of a true tale recounted by Mr. Browning, the graphic and brilliant story of the duke and the druggist's daughter. The parleying with *Christopher Smart* (the author of the *Song to David*, born at Shipborne, in Kent, 1722; died in the King's Bench, 1770) is an extremely interesting study in a case not

unsimilar to those of the *Two Poets of Croisic*. *George Bubb Dodington* (Lord Melcombe, born 1691; died 1762) stands as type of the dishonest politician, and in the course of a colloquy, which is really a piece of sardonic irony long drawn out, receives at once castigation and instruction. The parleying with *Francis Furini* (born at Florence, 1600) deals with its hero as man, as artist and as priest; it contains some of Mr. Browning's noblest writing on art; and it touches on current—though, indeed, continual—controversies in its splendidly vigorous 'onslaught on the decriers of that supreme art which aims at painting men and women as God made them. *Gerard de Lairesse* (born at Liège, in Flanders, 1640; died at Amsterdam 1711; famed not only for his pictures, but for his *Treatise on the Art of Painting*, composed after he had become blind) gives his name to a discussion on the artistic interpretation of nature, its change and advancement, and the deeper and truer vision which has displaced the mythological fancies of earlier painters and poets. The parleying with *Charles Avison* (born at Newcastle, 1710; died there, 1770), the more than half-forgotten organist composer, embodies an inquiry, critical or speculative, into the position and function of music. All these poems are written in decasyllabic rhymed verse, with varied arrangement of the rhymes. They are introduced by a dialogue between Apollo and the Fates, and concluded by another between John Fust and his friends, both written in lyric measure, both uniting deep seriousness of intention with capricious humour of form, the one wild, and stormy, and weird as the great "Dance of Furies" in Glück's *Orfeo*; the other quaint and grimly and sublimely grotesque as an old German picture. *Gerard de Lairesse* contains a charming little "Spring Song" of three stanzas; and *Charles Avison* a sounding train-bands' chorus, written to the air of one of Avison's marches.

The volume as a whole is a remarkably brilliant one, notable not less for its fineness of versification, its splendour of sound and colour, than for its depth and acuteness of thought and keen grasp of intricate arguments. Indeed, the feature which more than any other distinguishes it from Mr Browning's recent work is the particular attention paid to style and versification, and the particular beauty of certain special passages. Much of Mr. Browning's later work would be ill represented by a selection of the "purple patches." His strength has always lain, but of late has lain much more exclusively, in the *ensemble*. Here, however, there is not merely one passage of more than a hundred and fifty lines, the like of which (I do not say in every sense the equal, but certainly the like of which) we must go back to *Sordello* or to *Paracelsus* to find; but, again and again, wherever we turn, we are constantly meeting with more than usually fine and impressive passages, single lines of noticeably and more than usually exquisite quality. The glory of the whole collection is certainly the "Walk," or description, in fancied rivalry with Gerard de Lairese, of a whole day's changes, from sunrise to sunset. To equal it we must look a long way back in our Browning, and nowhere out of Browning. Where all is so good, any preference must seem partial; but perhaps nothing in it all is quite equal to the picture of morning.

" But morning's laugh sets all the crags alight
Above the baffled tempest : tree and tree
Stir themselves from the stupor of the night
And every strangled branch resumes its right
To breathe, shakes loose dark's clinging dregs, waves free
In dripping glory. Prone the runnels plunge,
While earth, distent with moisture like a sponge,
Smokes up, and leaves each plant its gem to see,
Each grass-blade's glory-glitter. Had I known
The torrent now turned river ?—masterful

Making its rush o'er tumbled ravage—stone
And stub which barred the froths and foams: no bull
Ever broke bounds in formidable sport
More overwhelmingly, till lo, the spasm
Sets him to dare that last mad leap: report
Who may—his fortunes in the deathly chasm
That swallows him in silence! Rather turn
Whether, upon the upland, pedestalled
Into the broad day-splendour, whom discern
These eyes but thee, supreme one, rightly called
Moon-maid in heaven above and, here below,
Earth's huntress-queen? I note the garb succinct
Saving from smirch that purity of snow
From breast to knee—snow's self with just the tinct
Of the apple-blossom's heart-blush. Ah, the bow
Slack-strung her fingers grasp, where, ivory-linked
Horn curving blends with horn, a moonlike pair
Which mimic the brow's crescent sparkling so—
As if a star's live restless fragment winked
Proud yet repugnant, captive in such hair!
What hope along the hillside, what far bliss
Lets the crisp hair-plaits fall so low they kiss
Those lucid shoulders? Must a morn so blithe
Needs have its sorrow when the twang and hiss
Tell that from out thy sheaf one shaft makes writhe
Its victim, thou unerring Artemis?
Why did the chamois stand so fair a mark,
Arrested by the novel shape he dreamed
Was bred of liquid marble in the dark
Depths of the mountain's womb that ever teemed
With novel births of wonder? Not one spark
Of pity in that steel-grey glance which gleamed
At the poor hoof's protesting as it stamped
Idly the granite? Let me glide unseen
From thy proud presence: well may'st thou be queen
Of all those strange and sudden deaths which damped
So oft Love's torch and Hymen's taper lit
For happy marriage till the maidens paled
And perished on the temple-step, assailed
y—what except to envy must man's wit
Impute the sure implacable release
Of life from warmth and joy? But death means peace.

This is magnificent writing, more magnificent writing than Mr. Browning has often given us. Yet there is no doubt that, had he liked, he could have given us very much of it. Why has he not done so? Because he has preferred to write of and for humanity; because a living man is of more value to him than a splendid landscape, an accent of the heart than a flourish of the voice. "With souls should souls have place"—words quoted already from a dainty lyric—this, with Mr. Browning, is something more than a mere poetical conceit. It is the condensed expression of an experience, a philosophy and an art. Like the lovers of his lyric, Mr. Browning has renounced the selfish serenities of wild-wood and dream-palace: he has fared up and down among men, listening to the music of humanity, observing the acts of men, and he has sung what he has heard, and he has painted what he has seen. Will the work live? we ask: and we can answer only in his own words:—

"It lives,
If precious be the soul of man to man."

APPENDIX.

I.

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT BROWNING.

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THE following list of the published writings of Robert Browning, in the order of their publication, has been compiled mainly from Dr. Furnivall's very complete and serviceable Browning Bibliography, contained in the first part of the Browning Society's Papers (pp. 21—71). Volumes of "Selections" are not noticed in this list: there have been four in England, some in Germany and in the Tauchnitz Collection, and a large number, authorised and unauthorised, in America, where an edition of the complete works has also been published, in seven volumes, by Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston.

1. PAULINE; a Fragment of a Confession. London: Saunders and Otley, Conduit Street. 1833, pp. 71.
2. PARACELUS. By Robert Browning. London. Published by Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange. MDCCCXXXV, pp. xi., 216.
3. Four Poems contributed to *The Monthly Repository* (edited by W. J. Fox), 1835-6; all signed "Z."—I. The King—(Vol. ix., New Series, pp. 707—8.) Reprinted, with six fresh lines, and revised throughout, in *Pippa Passes* (1841), where it is Pippa's song in Part III.—II., III. Porphyria and Johannes Agricola. (Vol. x., pp. 43—6.) Reprinted in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) under the title of *Madhouse Cells*.—IV. Lines. (Vol. x., pp. 270—1.) Reprinted, revised, in *Dramatis Personæ* (1864) as the first six stanzas of § VI. of *James Lee*.
4. STRAFFORD: an Historical Tragedy. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Printed for Longman, Rees, Orme, Browne, Green, and Longman, Paternoster Row. 1837, pp. vi., 131.

5. **SORDELLO.** By Robert Browning. London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXL, pp. iv., 253.
6. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. I.—PIPPA PASSES.** By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLI, pp. 16. (Price 6*d.* sewed.)
7. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. II.—KING VICTOR AND KING CHARLES.** By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLII, pp. 20. (Price 1*s.*, sewed.)
8. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. III.—DRAMATIC LYRICS.** By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLII, pp. 16. (Price 1*s.*, sewed).
 Contents:—1. Cavalier Tunes: I. Marching Along; II. Give a Rouse; III. My Wife Gertrude [Boot and Saddle, 1863]. 2. Italy and France: I. Italy [My Last Duchess.—Ferrara, 1863]; II. France [Count Gismond.—Aix in Provence, 1863]. 3. Camp and Cloister: I. Camp (French) [Incident of the French Camp, 1863]; II. Cloister (Spanish) [Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister, 1863]. 4. In a Gondola. 5. Artemis Prologuizes. 6. Waring. 7. Queen Worship. I. Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli; II. Cristina. 8. Madhouse Cells: I. [Johannes Agricola, 1863]; II. [Porphyria's Lover, 1863]. 9. Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr. 10. The Pied Piper of Hamelin.
9. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. IV.—THE RETURN OF THE DRUSES.** A Tragedy in Five Acts. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLIII, pp. 19. (Price 1*s.*, sewed.)
10. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. V.—A BLOT IN THE SCUTCHEON.** A Tragedy in Five Acts. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLIII, pp. 16. (Price 1*s.*, sewed.)
11. **BELLS AND POMEGRANATES: No. VI.—COLOMBE'S BIRTHDAY.** A Play in Five Acts. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLIV. Pp. 24. (Price 1*s.*, sewed).
12. Eight Poems contributed to *Hood's Magazine*, June, 1844, to April, 1845:—I. The Laboratory (Ancien Régime). (June, 1844, vol. 1, No. VI., pp. 513—14). Reprinted in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), as the first of two poems called "France and Spain,"—II., III. Claret and Tokay (*id.* p. 525). Reprinted in

Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845).—IV., V. Garden Fancies : 1. The Flower's Name ; 2. Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis. (July, 1844, Vol. ii., No. VII., pp. 458.) Reprinted in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845).—VI. The Boy and the Angel. (August, 1844, Vol. ii., No. VIII., pp. 140—2.) Reprinted, revised, and with five fresh couplets, in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845).—VII. The Tomb at St. Praxed's (Rome, 15—) (March, 1845, Vol. iii., No. III., pp. 237—39). Reprinted in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845).—VIII. The Flight of the Duchess. (April, 1845, Vol. iii., No. IV., pp. 313—18.) Part first only, § 1—9 ; reprinted, with the remainder added, in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845).

13. BELLS AND POMEGRANATES : NO. VII.—DRAMATIC ROMANCES AND LYRICS. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London : Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLV, pp. 24. (Price 2s., sewed.)

Contents :—1. How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix. 2. Pictor Ignotus [Florence, 15—]. 3. Italy in England [The Italian in England, 1849]. 4. England in Italy, *Piano di Sorrento* [The Englishman in Italy, 1849]. 5. The Lost Leader. 6. The Lost Mistress. 7. Home Thoughts from Abroad. 8. The Tomb at St. Praxed's [The Bishop orders his Tomb in St. Praxed's Church, 1863]. 9. Garden Fancies : I. The Flower's Name ; II. Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis. 10. France and Spain : I. The Laboratory (*Ancien Régime*) ; II. The Confessional. 11. The Flight of the Duchess. 12. Earth's Immortalities. 13. Song. 14. The Boy and the Angel. 15. Night and Morning : I. Night [Meeting at Night, 1863] ; II. Morning [Parting at Morning, 1863]. 16. Claret and Tokay [Nationality in Drinks, 1863]. 17. Saul. 18. Time's Revenges. 19. The Glove (Peter Ronsard *loquitur*).

14. BELLS AND POMEGRANATES : NO. VIII.—LURIA ; and A SOUL'S TRAGEDY. By Robert Browning, Author of "Paracelsus." London : Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXLVI, pp. 32. (Price 2s. 6d., sewed.)

15. POEMS. By Robert Browning. In two volumes. A new edition. London : Chapman and Hall, 186, Strand. 1849, p. viii., 386 ; viii., 416. These two volumes contain *Paracelsus* and *Bells and Pomegranates*.

16. CHRISTMAS-EVE AND EASTER-DAY. A Poem. By Robert Browning. London : Chapman and Hall, 186, Strand. 1850, pp. iv., 142.

17. Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley. With an INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

by Robert Browning. London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. 1852, pp. vi., 165. (Introductory Essay, pp. 1—44).

These so-called Letters of Shelley proved to be forgeries, and the volume was suppressed. Mr. Browning's essay has been reprinted by the Browning Society. Its value to students of Shelley is in no way impaired by its chance connection with the forged letters, to which it barely alludes.

18. TWO POEMS. By E. B. B. and R. B. London: Chapman and Hall. 1854, pp. 16.

This pamphlet contains "A Plea for the Ragged Schools of London," by E. B. B., and "The Twins," by R. B. The two poems were printed by Miss Arabella Barrett, Mrs. Browning's sister, for a bazaar in aid of a "Refuge for Young Destitute Girls," one of the earliest of its kind, founded by her in 1854.

19. MEN AND WOMEN. By Robert Browning. In two volumes. London: Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly. 1855 Vol. i., pp. iv., 260; vol. ii., pp. iv., 241.

Vol. I. Contents:—1. Love among the Ruins. 2. A Lovers' Quarrel. 3. Evelyn Hope. 4. Up at a Villa—Down in the City (as distinguished by an Italian Person of Quality). 5. A Woman's Last Word. 6. Fra Lippo Lippi. 7. A Toccata of Galuppi's. 8. By the Fire-Side. 9. Any Wife to any Husband. 10. An Epistle Concerning the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician. 11. Mesmerism. 12. A Serenade at the Villa. 13. My Star. 14. Instans Tyrannus. 15. A Pretty Woman. 16. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." 17. Respectability. 18. A Light Woman. 19. The Statue and the Bust. 20. Love in a Life. 21. Life in a Love. 22. How it Strikes a Contemporary. 23. The Last Ride Together. 24. The Patriot—*An Old Story*. 25. Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha. 26. Bishop Blougram's Apology. 27. Memorabilia.

Vol. II. Contents:—1. Andrea del Sarto (Called the Faultless Painter). 2. Before. 3. After. 4. In Three Days. 5. In a Year. 6. Old Pictures in Florence. 7. In a Balcony. 8. Saul. 9. "De Gustibus." 10. Women and Roses. 11. Protus. 12. Holy-Cross Day. 13. The Guardian Angel: a Picture at Fano. 14. Cleon. 15. The Twins. 16. Popularity. 17. The Heretic's Tragedy: A Middle Age Interlude. 18. Two in the Campagna. 19. A Grammarian's Funeral. 20. One Way of Love. 21. Another Way of Love. 22. "Transcendentalism": a Poem in Twelve Books. 23. Misconceptions. 24. One Word More: To E. B. B.

20. Ben Karshook's Wisdom. (Five stanzas of four lines each, signed "Robert Browning," and dated, "Rome, April 27, 1854.")—*The Keepsake*. 1856. (Edited by Miss Power, and published by David Bogue, London). P. 16.

This poem has never been reprinted by the author in any of his collected volumes, but is to be found in Furnivall's *Browning Bibliography*.

21. May and Death.—*The Keepsake*, 1857, p. 164. Reprinted, with some new readings, in *Dramatis Personæ* (1864).
22. THE POETICAL WORKS of Robert Browning. Third edition. Vol. I. Lyrics, Romances, Men and Women. Vol. II. Tragedies and other Plays. Vol. III. Paracelsus, Christmas Eve and Easter Day, Sordello. London: Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly. 1863.

There are no new poems in this edition, but the pieces originally published under the titles of *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Lyrics and Romances*, and *Men and Women*, are redistributed. This arrangement has been preserved in all subsequent editions. The table of contents below will thus show the present position of the poems.

VOL. I. Contents—LYRICS:—1. Cavalier Tunes. 2. The Lost Leader. 3. "How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix." 4. Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr. 5. Nationality in Drinks. 6. Garden Fancies.* 7. The Laboratory. 8. The Confessional. 9. Cristina. 10. The Lost Mistress. 11. Earth's Immortalities. 12. Meeting at Night. 13. Parting at Morning. 14. Song. 15. A Woman's Last Word. 16. Evelyn Hope. 17. Love among the Ruins. 18. A Lovers' Quarrel. 19. Up at a Villa—Down in the City. 20. A Toccata of Galuppi's. 21. Old Pictures in Florence. 22. "De Gustibus—." 23. Home-Thoughts from Abroad. 24. Home-Thoughts from the Sea. 25. Saul. 26. My Star. 27. By the Fire-side. 28. Any Wife to any Husband. 29. Two in the Campagna. 30. Misconceptions. 31. A Serenade at the Villa. 32. One Way of Love. 33. Another Way of Love. 34. A Pretty Woman. 35. Respectability. 36. Love in a Life. 37. Life in a Love. 38. In Three Days. 39. In a Year. 40. Women and Roses. 41. Before. 42. After. 43. The Guardian Angel. 44. Memorabilia. 45. Popularity. 46. Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha.

ROMANCES:—1. Incident of the French Camp. 2. The Patriot. 3. My Last Duchess. 4. Count Gismond. 5. The Boy and the Angel. 6. Instans Tyrannus. 7. Mesmerism. 8. The Glove. 9. Time's Revenges. 10. The Italian in England. 11. The Englishman in Italy. 12. In a Gondola. 13. Waring. 14. The Twins. 15. A Light Woman. 16. The Last Ride Together. 17. The Pied Piper of Hamelin. 18. The Flight of the Duchess. 19. A Grammarian's Funeral. 20. Johannes Agricola in Meditation. 21. The Heretic's Tragedy. 22. Holy-Cross Day. 23. Protus. 24. The Statue and the Bust. 25. Porphyria's Lover. 26. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

* The *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* is here included as No. III. In the edition of 1868 it follows under a separate heading. This is the only point of difference between the two editions.

MEN AND WOMEN:—1. "Transcendentalism." 2. How it Strikes a Contemporary. 3. Artemis Prologuizes. 4. An Epistle containing the strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician. 5. Pictor Ignotus. 6. Fra Lippo Lippi. 7. Andrea del Sarto. 8. The Bishop orders his Tomb in St. Praxed's Church. 9. Bishop Blougram's Apology. 10. Cleon. 11. Rudel to the Lady of Tropolii. 12. One Word More.

VOL. II. Contents—**TRAGEDIES AND OTHER PLAYS**:—1. Pippa Passes. 2. King Victor and King Charles. 3. The Return of the Druses. 4. A Blot in the 'Scutcheon. 5. Colombe's Birthday. 6. Luria. 7. A Soul's Tragedy. 8. In a Balcony. 9. Strafford.

VOL. III. Contents:—1. Paracelsus. 2. Christmas Eve and Easter Day. 3. Sordello.

23. **DRAMATIS PERSONÆ**. By Robert Browning. London: Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly. 1864, pp. vi., 250.

Contents:—1. James Lee [James Lee's Wife, 1868]. 2. Gold Hair: a Legend of Pornic. 3. The Worst of it. 4. Dis aliter visum; or, Le Byron de nos jours. 5. Too Late. 6. Abt Vogler. 7. Rabbi ben Ezra. 8. A Death in the Desert. 9. Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island. 10. Confessions. 11. May and Death. 12. Prospice. 13. Youth and Art. 14. A Face. 15. A Likeness. 16. Mr. Sludge "the Medium." 17. Apparent Failure. 18. Epilogue.

24. **Orpheus and Eurydice**.—*Catalogue of the Royal Academy*, 1864, p. 13. No. 217. A picture by F. Leighton.

Printed as prose. It is reprinted in *Poetical Works*, 1868, where it is included in *Dramatis Personæ*. The same volume contains a new stanza of eight lines, entitled "Deaf and Dumb: a Group by Woolner." This was written in 1862 for Woolner's partly-draped group of Constance and Arthur, the deaf and dumb children of Sir Thomas Fairbairn, which was exhibited in the International Exhibition of 1862.

25. **THE POETICAL WORKS** of Robert Browning, M.A., Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 15, Waterloo Place. 1868. Vol. I., pp. viii., 310. Pauline—Paracelsus—Strafford. Vol. II., pp. iv., 287. Sordello—Pippa Passes. Vol. III., pp. iv., 305. King Victor and King Charles—Dramatic Lyrics—The Return of the Druses. Vol. IV., pp. iv., 321. A Blot in the 'Scutcheon—Colombe's Birthday—Dramatic Romances. Vol. V., pp. iv., 321. A Soul's Tragedy—Luria—Christmas Eve and Easter Day—Men and Women. Vol. VI., pp. iv., 233. In a Balcony—*Dramatis Personæ*. This edition retains the redistribution of the minor poems in the edition of 1863, already mentioned.

26. **THE RING AND THE BOOK**. By Robert Browning, M.A., Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford. In four volumes.

- London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1868-9. Vol. I., pp. iv., 245 ; Vol. II., pp. iv., 251 ; Vol. III., pp. iv., 249 ; Vol. IV., pp. iv., 235.
27. Hervé Riel.—*Cornhill Magazine*, March, 1871, pp. 257—60. Reprinted in *Pacchiarotto, and other Poems* (1876).
28. BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE : Including a Transcript from Euripides. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1871, pp. iv., 170.
29. PRINCE HOHENSTIEL-SCHWANGAU : SAVIOUR OF SOCIETY. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1871, pp. iv., 148.
30. FIFINE AT THE FAIR. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1872, pp. xii., 171.
31. RED COTTON NIGHT-CAP COUNTRY ; OR, TURF AND TOWERS. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1873, pp. iv., 282.
32. ARISTOPHANES' APOLOGY : Including a Transcript from Euripides : Being the LAST ADVENTURE OF BALAUSTION. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1875, pp. viii., 366.
33. THE INN ALBUM. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1875, pp. iv., 211.
34. PACCHIAROTTO, and how he worked in Distemper : with other Poems. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1876, pp. viii., 241.
- Contents :—1. Prologue. 2. Of Pacchiarotto, and how he worked in Distemper. 3. At the 'Mermaid.' 4. House. 5. Shop. 6. Pisgah-Sights (1, 2). 7. Fears and Scruples. 8. Natural Magic. 9. Magical Nature. 10. Bifurcation. 11. Numpholeptos. 12. Appearances. 13. St. Martin's Summer. 14. Hervé Riel. 15. A Forgiveness. 16. Cenciája. 17. Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial (a Reminiscence of A.D. 1676). 18. Epilogue.
35. THE AGAMEMNON OF ÆSCHYLUS. Transcribed by Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1877, pp. xi. (Preface, v.—xi.), 148.
36. LA SAISIAZ : THE TWO POETS OF CROISIC. By Robert Browning. London : Smith, Elder and Co. 1878, pp. viii., 201.
- Contents :—1. Prologue. 2. La Saisiaz (pp. 5—82). The Two Poets of Croisic (pp. 87—191). Epilogue.
37. "Oh, Love, Love" : Translation from the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. (Eighteen lines, dated "Dec. 18, 1878"). Contributed to Prof.

J. P. Mahaffy's *Euripides* ("Classical Writers." Macmillan. 1879). P. 115.

DRAMATIC IDYLS. By Robert Browning. London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1879, pp. vi., 143.

Contents:—1. Martin Relph. 2. Pheidippides. 3. Halbert and Hob. 4. Iván Ivánovitch. 5. Tray. 6. Ned Bratts.

39. DRAMATIC IDYLS. Second Series. By Robert Browning. London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1880, pp. viii., 149.

Contents:—Prologue. 1. Echelos. 2. Clive. 3. Muléykeh. 4. Pietro of Abano. 5. Doctor——. 6. Pan and Luna. Epilogue.

40. Ten New Lines to "Epilogue."—*Scribner's Century Magazine*, November, 1882. Lines written in an autograph album, October, 14, 1880. Printed in the *Century* without Mr. Browning's consent. Reprinted in the first issue of the Browning Society's Papers, Part III., p. 48, but withdrawn from the second issue.

41. JOCOSERIA. By Robert Browning. London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1883, pp. viii., 143.

Contents:—1. Wanting is—What? 2. Donald. 3. Solomon and Balkis. 4. Cristina and Monaldeschi. 5. Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli. 6. Adam, Lilith, and Eve. 7. Ixion. 8. Jochanan Hakkadosh. 9. Never the Time and the Place. 10. Pambo.

42. Song from the German.—*The Hour will Come*. By Wilhelmine von Hillern. Translated by Clara Bell. London: Bentley. 1883. Printed anonymously; quoted, with statement of authorship, in *The Whitehall Review*, March 1, 1883. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part IV., p. 410.

43. Sonnet on Goldoni (dated "Venice, Nov. 27, 1883").—*Pall Mall Gazette*, December 8, 1883, p. 2. Written for the Album of the Committee of the Goldoni Monument at Venice, and inserted on the first page. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part V., p. 98.*

44. Paraphrase from Horace.—*Pall Mall Gazette*, December, 13, 1883, p. 6. Four lines, written impromptu for Mr. Felix Moscheles. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part V., p. 99.*

45. Helen's Tower: Sonnet (Dated "April 26, 1870").—*Pall Mall Gazette*, December 28, 1883, p. 2. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part V., p. 97.* Written for the Earl of Dufferin, who built a tower in memory of his mother, Helen, Countess of Gifford, on a rock on his estate, at Clondeboye,

Ireland. Lord Tennyson's lines, written on the same occasion, appeared a little previously in *The Leisure Hour*.

46. *The Divine Order, and other Sermons and Addresses.* By the late Thomas Jones. Edited by Brynmor Jones, LL.B. With INTRODUCTION by Robert Browning. London: W. Isbister. 1884. The introduction is on pp. xi.—xiii.
47. Sonnet on Rawdon Brown. (Dated "November 28, 1883").—*Century Magazine*, "Bric-à-brac" column, February, 1884. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part V., p. 132.* Written at Venice, on an apocryphal story relating to the late Mr. Rawdon Brown, who "went to Venice for a short visit, with a definite object in view, and ended by staying forty years."
48. *The Founder of the Feast*: Sonnet. (Dated "April 5, 1884").—*The World*, April 16, 1884. Inscribed by Mr. Browning in the Album presented to Mr. Arthur Chappell, director of the St. James's Hall Saturday and Monday Popular Concerts. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part VII., p. 18.*
49. *The Names*: Sonnet on Shakespeare. (Dated "March 12, 1884").—*Shakespeare Show Book*, May 29, 1884, p. 1. Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part V., p. 105.*
50. *FERISHTAH'S FANCIES.* By Robert Browning. London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1884, pp. viii., 143. Each blank verse "Fancy" is followed by a short lyric.
 Contents:—Prologue. Ferishtah's Fancies: 1. The Eagle. 2. The Melon-seller. 3. Shah Abbas. 4. The Family. 5. The Sun. 6. Mihrab Shah. 7. A Camel-Driver. 8. Two Camels. 9. Cherries. 10. Plot-Culture. 11. A Pillar at Sebzevah. 12. A Bean-Stripe: also Apple-Eating. Epilogue.
51. *Why I am a Liberal*: Sonnet.—*Why I am a Liberal*, edited by Andrew Reid. London: Cassell and Co. 1885, Reprinted in the Browning Society's Papers, Part VII., p. 92.*
52. *Spring Song.*—*The New Amphion*; being the Book of the Edinburgh University Union Fancy Fair. Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, University Press, 1886. The poem is on p. 1. Reprinted in *Parleyings*, p. 189.
53. *PARLEYINGS WITH CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE IN THEIR DAY*: to wit, Bernard de Mandeville, Daniel Bartoli, Christopher Smart, George Bubbs Dodington, Francis Furini, Gerard de Lairese, and Charles Avison. Introduced by a Dialogue between

Apollo and the Fates, concluded by another between John Fust and his Friends. By Robert Browning. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15, Waterloo Place, 1887, pp. viii., 268.

Contents: Apollo and the Fates—A Prologue. Parleyings: 1. With Bernard de Mandeville. 2. With Daniel Bartoli. 3. With Christopher Smart. 4. With George Bubb Dodington. 5. With Francis Furini. 6. With Gerard de Lairese. 7. With Charles Avison. Fust and his Friends—An Epilogue.

II.

REPRINT OF DISCARDED PREFACES TO THE
FIRST EDITIONS OF SOME OF MR. BROWN-
ING'S WORKS.1. Preface to *Paracelsus* (1835).

"I am anxious that the reader should not, at the very outset,—mistaking my performance for one of a class with which it has nothing in common,—judge it by principles on which it has never been moulded, and subject it to a standard to which it was never meant to conform. I therefore anticipate his discovery, that it is an attempt, probably more novel than happy, to reverse the method usually adopted by writers, whose aim it is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons or events; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded: and this for a reason. I have endeavoured to write a poem, not a drama: the canons of the drama are well known, and I cannot but think that, inasmuch as they have immediate regard to stage representation, the peculiar advantages they hold out are really such, only so long as the purpose for which they were at first instituted is kept in view. I do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem, wherein all those restrictions only submitted to on account of compensating good in the original scheme are scrupulously retained, as though for some special fitness in themselves,—and all new facilities placed at an author's disposal by the vehicle he selects, as pertinaciously rejected. It is certain, however, that a work like mine depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success;—indeed, were my scenes stars, it must be his co-operating fancy which, supplying all chasms, shall connect the scattered lights into one constellation—a Lyre or a Crown. I trust for his indulgence towards a poem which had not been imagined six months ago, and that even should he think slightly of the present (an experiment

I am in no case likely to repeat) he will not be prejudiced against other productions which may follow in a more popular, and perhaps less difficult form.

"15th March, 1835."

2. Preface to *Strafford* (1837).

"I had for some time been engaged in a poem of a very different nature [*Sordello*] when induced to make the present attempt; and am not without apprehension that my eagerness to freshen a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch, may have operated unfavourably on the represented play, which is one of Action in Character, rather than Character in Action. To remedy this, in some degree, considerable curtailment will be necessary, and, in a few instances, the supplying details not required, I suppose, by the mere reader. While a trifling success would much gratify, failure will not wholly discourage me from another effort: experience is to come, and earnest endeavour may yet remove many disadvantages.

"The portraits are, I think, faithful; and I am exceedingly fortunate in being able, in proof of this, to refer to the subtle and eloquent exposition of the characters of Eliot and Strafford, in the Lives of Eminent British Statesmen now in the course of publication in Lardner's Cyclopædia, by a writer [John Forster] whom I am proud to call my friend; and whose biographies of Hampden, Pym, and Vane, will, I am sure, fitly illustrate the present year—the Second Centenary of the Trial concerning Ship-Money. My Carlisle, however, is purely imaginary: I at first sketched her singular likeness roughly in, as suggested by Matthew and the memoir-writers—but it was too artificial, and the substituted outline is exclusively from Voiture and Waller.

"The Italian boat-song in the last scene is from Redi's *Bacco*, long since naturalised in the joyous and delicate version of Leigh Hunt."

3. Preface to *Sordello* (not in first edition, but added in 1863). I reprint it,—though still retained by the author,—on account of its great importance as a piece of self-criticism or self-interpretation.

"To J. MILSAND, OF DIJON.

"Dear Friend,—Let the next poem be introduced by your name, and so repay all trouble it ever cost me. I wrote it twenty-

five years ago for only a few, counting even in these on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or book, such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since; for I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might,—instead of what the few must,—like: but after all, I imagined another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it. The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study I, at least, always thought so—you, with many known and unknown to me, think so—others may one day think so: and whether my attempt remain for them or not, I trust, though away and past it, to continue ever yours,

“R. B.

“London, June 9, 1863.

4. Preface to *Bells and Pomegranates*.—I. *Pippa Passes* (1841).

“ADVERTISEMENT.

“Two or three years ago I wrote a Play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is, that a Pit-full of good-natured people applauded it: ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows, I mean for the first of a series of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals; and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear, will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again. Of course such a work must go on no longer than it is liked; and to provide against a certain and but too possible contingency, let me hasten to say now—what, if I were sure of success, I would try to say circumstantially enough at the close—that I dedicate my best intentions most admiringly to the author of ‘*Ion*’—most affectionately to Serjeant Talfourd.

“ROBERT BROWNING.”

5. Preface to *Bells and Pomegranates*.—VIII. *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*.

“Here ends my first series of ‘*Bells and Pomegranates* : ’ and I take the opportunity of explaining, in reply to inquiries, that I only meant by that title to indicate an endeavour towards something like an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought; which looks too ambitious, thus

expressed, so the symbol was preferred. It is little to the purpose, that such is actually one of the most familiar of the many Rabbinical (and Patristic) acceptations of the phrase ; because I confess that, letting authority alone, I supposed the bare words, in such juxtaposition, would sufficiently convey the desired meaning. 'Faith and good works' is another fancy, for instance, and perhaps no easier to arrive at : yet Giotto placed a pomegranate-fruit in the hand of Dante, and Raffaello crowned his Theology (in the *Camera della Segnatura*) with blossoms of the same ; as if the Bellari and Vasari would be sure to come after, and explain that it was merely '*simbolo delle buone opere—il qual Pomogranato fu però usato nelle vesti del Pontefice appresso gli Ebrei.*' " R. B."

It may be worth while to append the interesting concluding paragraph of the preface to the first series of *Selections*, issued by Messrs. Smith, Elder and Co., in 1872 :

"A few years ago, had such an opportunity presented itself, I might have been tempted to say a word in reply to the objections my poetry was used to encounter. Time has kindly co-operated with my disinclination to write the poetry and the criticism besides. The readers I am at last privileged to expect, meet me fully half-way ; and if, from their fitting standpoint, they must still 'censure me in their wisdom,' they have previously 'awakened their senses that they may the better judge.' Nor do I apprehend any more charges of being wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless, or perversely harsh. Having hitherto done my utmost in the art to which my life is a devotion, I cannot engage to increase the effort ; but I conceive that there may be helpful light, as well as reassuring warmth, in the attention and sympathy I gratefully acknowledge.

"London, May 14, 1872."

" R. B.

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